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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

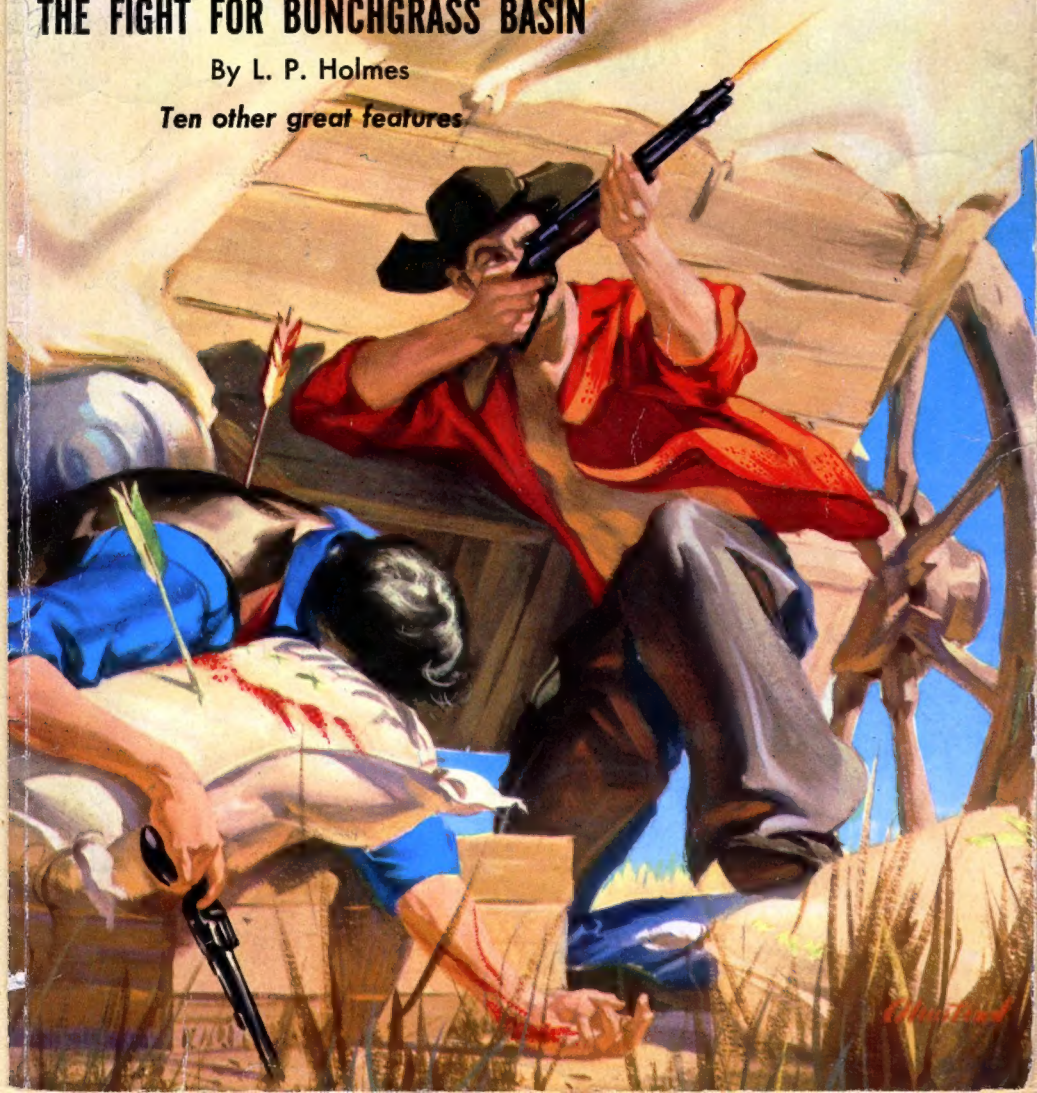
DELL

A Complete Novel

THE FIGHT FOR BUNCHGRASS BASIN

By L. P. Holmes

Ten other great features



"Get off the street!" Cleve said harshly. "And take Miss Dane with you."

The Fight for Bunchgrass Basin, Chap. 6

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *THE FIGHT FOR BUNCHGRASS BASIN*

THE THREAT OF SAVAGE CONFLICT *looms over Bunchgrass Basin as two newcomers, suave Pardee Dane and brutal Grat Mallory, start a campaign, already proven successful in other places, to take over the Basin. Cleve Fraser, of the small but prospering Saber spread, urges the other Basin ranchers to combine their resources against Dane's powerful Rafter X outfit but they fail to see the light until Rafter X has shipped in thousands of cattle to hog the Bunchgrass graze. Cleve has his personal problems, too, since the girl he loves, Leslie Cormack, is betrothed to his lifelong friend, Vance Ogden, whose easy-going nature has let him slip gradually into a shiftless existence of cards, liquor, and worse. Temporarily diverted by the bountiful attractions of the seductive and sophisticated Sherry Dane, Cleve discovers that old friendships are best after Vance Ogden meets tragedy and Leslie Cormack faces a seemingly bleak future. Then showdown comes as Rafter X, controlling Bunchgrass, makes its try for like control of the Basin's summer range. Cleve and his finally united neighbors accept the challenge in a hard-hitting counter-attack, and the issue is decided in a climactic, thrill-packed dawn assault on Rafter X.*

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The Fight for Bunchgrass Basin

By L. P. HOLMES

CHAPTER ONE

Ides of Spring

SOMETIME during the night came the change of seasons. Awakening to an unaccustomed warmth, Cleve Fraser threw back a couple of blankets and lay listening to the drip of water from the eaves of the ranch house. The spring thaw was on.

Reared on one elbow, Fraser built a cigarette and after lighting it used the match's thin flare for a glance at the heavy silver-case watch hanging on a nail by the head of his bunk. Five o'clock. Daylight would begin to show in another hour.

Fraser had been impatiently waiting for this thing to happen, the breaking of winter's stubborn grip. It had been a winter that had come early and stayed late. In the higher reaches of the Sentinels the snow had piled deep and for months there had never been less than a foot of it on the benchland level around Saber headquarters.

That there would be some winter kill of the weaker cattle, Fraser knew, while the hardier ones would have been far drifted. Spring roundup would be a heavier chore than usual, but right now Fraser was eager for the drive and grinding toil of it, for he was restless from the long weeks of comparative inactivity.

He smoked out his cigarette, then

got up and dressed in the dark. He felt his way out into the kitchen, lighted a lamp, and got a fire going in the stove. He put on a pot of coffee to cook and a pan of water to heat. He got out his razor and was beginning to shave when the back door opened and Soddy Joens, who had come across from the bunkhouse, stepped in from the dripping dark.

Soddy was long, lank, and lugubrious. He backed up to the purring stove and spread his hands to the heat.

"World's leakin' water from every damn crack and corner," he observed grumpily. "First it was snow we had to wallow through, now it'll be muck. Sure will seem good to feel summer's sun on the back of my neck and to drop in at the drag of a gather and get a lungful of honest dust."

Fraser grinned. "You're a hard man to satisfy, Soddy. More than once I've heard you cussin' dust."

Soddy grunted. "Man's got to cuss somethin' or shrivel in his own acid." He laid a dour glance on Fraser. "Hell of a time of day for a man to shave. You must be figurin' on town."

Fraser nodded. "Want to be on hand to see the fun."

The coffeepot began to rumble and steam. Soddy poured a cup, cradled it in both hands, and sipped cautiously. A thought came to him and his head swung up. "That's right—this is the day. You figure to put in a bid on Bunchgrass, Cleve?"

Fraser worked the keen steel carefully about the angle of his chin. "Not me. Where would I get the money?"

"Mebbe you could borrow it from Stock Portland," Soddy suggested.

Fraser shook his head. "Grat Mallory is going to get Bunchgrass, Soddy. He's got the money of his combine behind him. Only way Mallory could be kept out of the deal would be if all the outfits around the rim of Bunchgrass would pool their cash and buck him together. But they won't do that. For years they've been pulling and hauling over that government range, each one jealous of the other fellow. Which Mallory damn well realizes."

"Mallory closes them out of Bunchgrass they'll have plenty reason to pull and haul," observed Soddy darkly. "Without that range to work on they'll all be way overgrazed. Think they'd realize that."

"You'd think they would," agreed Fraser, wiping his razor and putting it away. He filled a wash basin with hot water, stripped to the waist, and scrubbed luxuriously.

He looked a bigger man out of his shirt than in it. He was long of limb and heavy of bone, with muscles that lay smooth but solidly packed across his back and shoulders. The deep weather tan of his face and neck was in strong contrast to the whiteness of his torso.

His features were rugged and shaving always brought out more markedly the thin scar line which ran from the temple halfway down the right side of his face. It was not a disfiguring scar, but it did add a slight cast of harshness to his expression. His hair was thick and brown, with a suggestion of copper in it, and his eyes held a granite-gray shine in the lamplight.

Soddy Joens continued to brood over his coffee cup. "We ain't never used Bunchgrass like the others, Cleve, so that part of it won't make no difference to us. But I'm remembering that some of our high meadows, like the Garden, rate as mighty fine summer range. And grass hunger is like money

hunger with some men. They just never can get enough of it. Suppose Mallory, once he gets dug in solid in Bunchgrass, starts lookin' as high and far as the Garden—then what?"

Fraser shrugged big shoulders into his shirt. "Why," he said tersely, "it's just possible he'd find misery in the trail. But pour me a cup of that coffee and quit dreaming up troubles that may never come."

"Troubles always come," retorted Soddy pessimistically. "Man was born to 'em."

Day was breaking thinly through the timber when Fraser, up on a tall, line-backed dun horse, worked out the switchbacks of a down-running trail. Soddy had been right about the world leaking water. It ran amber brown and eager in every gulch and draw and the dun's hoofs, cutting through the thinning snow, churned and slopped in it.

The swiftness of the overnight change was startling. Snow that had been a white and solid mantle was shrinking steadily, taking on the look of a garment worn out and falling apart with age.

Fraser broke from the last of the timber and into the long, open slope. Here the snow was only a few ragged patches, scabbing the earth, and across the far-spread reaches of the lower flats there was no trace of it at all. A sky which had for weeks been monotonous with somber overcast, now lay clear from horizon to horizon, and in the east was beginning to flush up rosily. It would, thought Fraser, be no time at all before the first eager green of new grass would stain the warmer slopes.

Stony Creek was all arumble with wild waters and a number of white-faced cattle, shaggy in their winter coats, were prowling its willow-fringed borders. Fraser swung the dun over that way and read his Saber brand on most of them, deciding they were in very fair condition, all things considered. Several of the animals carried Alec Cormack's Shield and Cross iron and on a few Pete Jackson's Triangle P J showed. Which went to prove how winter's roughness could drift cattle, for the nearest limit of Jackson's range was a good twenty miles distant.

The sun came up and laid a bright glitter all across this wide, drenched land. Birds set up a cheery tumult in the creek willows and in the far distance the white alarm hairs on the rumps of a little band of antelope struck up a drifting shine. There was a bustling breeze in the air and it was clear vigor in a man's lungs. The world was on the move to better days and winter's bitterness was as if it had never been.

Fraser followed the run of Stony Creek to where it made its looping bend to the west. The crest of the furious, soil-yellowed waters lacked only a few feet of lipping the stringers of the log bridge which crossed here and the dun snorted with relief as it stepped again to solid earth on the far side. Half an hour later Fraser rode up to Alec Cormack's Shield and Cross headquarters.

A big, handsome sorrel horse stood under saddle at the corral fence, fretting with eagerness to go, and there also was Nate Lyons, one of Cormack's riders, hooking a team to the ranch buckboard. He grinned and lifted a hand.

"How! Mite early for a bear to come down out of the hills, ain't it?"

"Maybe," admitted Fraser cheerfully. "But this bear got restless. The family heading for town, Nate?"

Nate nodded. "Yup! Alec's goin' in to bat his head against a rock."

"The Bunchgrass deal?"

"That's right. Alec aims to bid on it, but he ain't got no more chance than I'd have. Grat Mallory's got too many pesos behind him. Some of us tried to tell Alec that, but you know how he is, Cleve. Stubborn old blister when he gets his neck bowed. You aimin' to mix in?"

"Not me!" Fraser's denial was emphatic. "I know my limits. Saw a few head of Pete Jackson's stuff over past Stony. You know what that means. We'll be all spring and maybe part of summer getting brands sorted out and the range tidied up again."

"Now that's a fact," agreed Nate. "Saw Hoot McCall in town last week and he said he'd counted better than twenty head of our cows along the stage road over by the Chinquapin Roughs. You know, Cleve, with brands scattered to hell an' gone in all directions, this range could break out in a rash of rustling. Conditions are sure made to order for it. A smart man, callin' his shots right, could make himself a real stake." Nate showed his small grin. "If I wasn't so damned lazy, I'd maybe consider that proposition myself."

"At your age!" chided Fraser. Then his tone and expression turned dry. "Rustlers don't come that smart, Nate. They just think they do. Now I never did hear of a rustler who lived to a ripe old age."

There was a stir at the door of the ranch house and Alec Cormack's tall daughter stepped out to face the morning's sun. She saw Fraser immediately and lifted a graceful arm in salute, then came picking her way across the puddled earth.

Cleve Fraser had known Leslie Cormack for a long time, yet he never saw her but that he was stirred by a small, marveling moment. For never had he known anyone who so completely reflected his or her environment. In this girl was a strong land's fresh vitality, the fire of its brighter moods, the strength and patience to resist its sterner ones. The warmth of its sun lay in her hair and the clear vigor of its clean winds shone in her eyes.

She was dressed for riding in a divided skirt of forest-green twill and a gray woolen blouse under a snugly buttoned jacket of smoke-cured buckskin. There was a silk muffler about her throat and her fair hair was tucked up under a flat-crowned sombrero. She was pulling on a pair of fringed gauntlet gloves and Fraser saw the glint of Vance Ogden's ring on her left hand.

Her naturally fresh color deepened slightly and she spoke, half smiling. "The man stares and stares."

Fraser grinned and shrugged. "Don't blame me, Les. After a steady diet of myself and four winter-soured punchers, well—!"

She loosed the sorrel's reins and stepped smoothly into the saddle. "I was wondering if you'd forgotten how to ride, Cleve. How long since you last stopped by? At least two months ago. Don't tell me a little snow had you buffaloed that bad."

"A little snow? Hah! Girl, what are you talking about? I can show you drifts up in the Sentinels twenty feet deep."

Nate Lyons, finished with hitching-in the buckboard team, climbed into the rig to drive over to the ranch

house. Leslie Cormack called to him:

"Tell Mother and Dad I'm going on ahead with Cleve."

She swung the sorrel around and Fraser's dun was hard put to keep up with the sorrel's first exuberant run. When she finally had her mount reined back to a jog, Leslie said:

"You don't lie worth shucks, my friend. There may be twenty-foot drifts back in the mountains, but nothing of the sort around Saber."

The run had put a strong glow in her cheeks and her eyes flashed their boundless vitality. Fraser's glance went slightly somber, and he said briefly, "Three's a crowd. Nothing truer than that, Les."

"Oh, nonsense!" she retorted spiritedly. "I was afraid you'd say something silly like that. Three wasn't a crowd a year ago, five years ago. You and Vance and I used to have lots of good times together, Cleve Fraser."

"That was a year ago—five years ago," said Fraser carefully. "Things are different now."

"Different—how?"

Fraser twisted up a cigarette. "Wasn't any ring on your finger then, Les. You were as free and happy as any other maverick, wearing no man's brand."

She swung her glance at him, suddenly quiet. The scarred side of his face was toward her, with its hint of taciturn harshness. She reached over and laid an impulsive hand on his arm.

"You can make me very unhappy, Cleve, if you let that ring affect our long and good friendship in any way. And I know Vance feels the same."

Fraser shook himself, showed her a slightly twisted grin. "Sorry, Les. I'm a surly brute. I'll always be around when I'm wanted. Nothing means more to me than to see you happy."

They had come to a down-running ridge from the north. The road cut around the point of this and beyond stretched the sweeping miles of Bunchgrass Basin. It was a great triangle of country, the apex angling back north and east to the very flank of the curving Sentinel Mountains which, dark with timber along the lower and middle reaches, finally drove white shoulders bursting through, which seemed to float like distant cloud masses against the morning's pure sky.

Here was a stretch of country that had once been a military reservation. Once, troops of the United States Cavalry had patrolled these miles in the days when Indian threat lay raw and real across the land. But long since were the Indians and the troopers gone and the barracks of the post on Red Bank Creek were abandoned.

Cattle bearing many brands had grazed across the basin, for as government land it had been free grass. But now the government was about to sell the basin at public auction to the highest bidder. Before this day's sun went down, these wide, free acres would have become private ones.

"It makes me queerly sad," said Leslie Cormack abruptly.

Fraser knew what she meant, and he nodded. "Nothing so free as free land. Just riding across it makes a man feel like the edges of his life reach clear out past where the sun comes up and where it goes down. Things are going to be a lot different when Grat Mallory owns all this."

She gave a quick, disturbed sigh. "You talk just like Vance does. So certain Mallory will get it."

"Tell me who's to stop him, and how?"

"He won't be the only one to bid."

"Sure," agreed Fraser. "I know that. Your father will make his try and so will Pete Jackson and Art Wilcoxon and Dan Shurtleff. Oh, they'll all be in at the start. But it's the final bid that'll buy Bunchgrass, and that bid will be Grat Mallory's."

She looked at him slantingly. "Won't you be there?"

"As a spectator, that's all. I never waste energy reaching for shadows, or something I can't touch. No profit in that, Les."

She considered a moment, a slight shadow darkening her eyes. "Grat Mallory must have made money awful fast. I can remember when he first moved in on this range, buying up the old Tanner place. He struck me as pretty skimpy stuff then. Now, of a sudden, you picture him as being entirely too prosperous for anyone to handle."

"My lovely playmate, you're overlooking something," drawled Fraser. "Which is that Grat Mallory is a sharp hombre, oh, a very sharp hombre indeed. He's organized himself a cattle company of some kind, with outside money behind him. And friend Grat isn't the kind to sit in on any game unless he's got the most chips and is holding the high cards. He's holding them now and—"

He broke off and reined in, his glance studying the moisture-darkened earth, now beginning to steam faintly under the building warmth of the sun. Leslie, startled by his sudden action, jibed mischievously.

"The earth—the good, fat earth. Did you just discover it?"

The corners of Fraser's eyes pinched sharply. "Cattle been through here," he said tersely. "And horses—two horses."

He straightened and his glance ran down the far reaches of the basin toward the Sentinels. He spoke without turning his head.

"You scatter along, Les. I'll catch up in a mile or so."

Before she could answer he had spurred away toward the northeast, following the sign. He kept to it for a good half mile before, satisfied with his findings, he turned, lifted the dun to a run, and angled down the distance to drop in again beside Leslie Cormack. A full two miles behind them, Alec Cormack and his wife came on in the buckboard at a spanking trot.

"Fine companion you are to pick for a ride," scolded Les, smiling. "Too bad it isn't later season and the grasshoppers out. You could have yourself just a dandy time chasing them."

Fraser grinned. "I can remember when we both chased them. And used 'em for bait when we fished in Stony Creek. Those were great days, Les. Not a blessed thing on our minds but sunshine."

"And now we're old and got troubles, is that it?"

"So Soddy Joens swears," chuckled Fraser. "Soddy says folks are born to have troubles."

"Soddy's favorite color is indigo. But now you're jumping in circles again. Come on, tell sister. What did you find on your little ride?"

"Maybe a dozen head of cattle went that way, with two riders chousing them. Straight back into the Sentinels."

"And that is strange?"

"Yeah," nodded Fraser dryly. "Considering conditions and the time of year, it sure is."

"I know," she conceded gravely. "Dad was talking about that very possibility last night at supper, and hop-

ing it wouldn't show or lead to anything drastic."

"Playing fast and loose with another man's cattle always leads to something drastic," said Fraser. "But those who play that sort of game know what the penalty can be. So they can't kick if it catches up with them."

She flashed him a swift glance. "Should you do the catching up with, I wonder if you'd be as tough as you sound?"

"That," evaded Fraser, "is a leading question and represents the kind of bridge I never cross until I come up with it."

Les pondered her question in silence. There were times when she thought she knew this man beside her more thoroughly than she knew any other human being, with the exception of her mother and father. But there were times when she wasn't so sure.

She knew he had the capacity for fun and laughter, but there had been a few times back across the years when she had seen him aroused, when his eyes would smoke up and turn dark, and utter bleakness sweep his face. Then she could recognize a ruthlessness that was iron-hard and unforgiving. Yet the man was openhanded, generous, and without a trace of meanness in him.

Quite candidly, on more than one occasion, Leslie Cormack had asked herself what attraction it was that Vance Ogden held for her that this man did not. She knew that in many ways Vance was weak where Cleve Fraser was strong. Even back in their youthful years it was Cleve who did things, while Vance would laugh and joke—and sidestep. Perhaps, she mused, knowing no trace of irresponsibility herself, it was this very thing in Vance Ogden that had drawn her. Or, she considered wryly, what some might call evidence of the maternal instinct. In any event she was not the sort to give her heart lightly, and she had given it to Vance Ogden. His ring was on her finger.

Traveling steadily, they had cut the miles down and now the road dropped below the level of Bunchgrass and came to where the benchland slanted steeply and lost itself in a sage desert's empty grayness.

Here also, where it could serve both the high country and the low, lay the town of Mineral, its buildings a ragged spread on either side of a wide and carelessly laid out street. Smoke winnowed pale and blue from chimney tops and windowpanes threw back the sun in bright flashes.

As they put their horses to the final drop, Fraser drawled, "After considerable time away from it, I always expect it to look better than it does. And then I always find it just the same old town, all spraddled out and homely as sin. Only one thing I know that's always up to expectations and never disappoints me."

He looked at his companion as he said this and chuckled at the swift beat of color in her cheeks. "As long as I can make you blush that way, Les, I'll always know there's one small corner of your heart that Vance Ogden doesn't own."

She tossed her head. "My friend, you presume."

When they turned in at the end of

the street, they saw Vance Ogden and Henry Poe taking the sun on the edge of the porch of Poe's store. Vance, a slender, carelessly graceful man, inclined a handsome head as they rode up.

"Beauty and the beast, Henry," he drawled lazily. "How do you suppose she managed to lure him down out of the sticks?"

Then Vance was off the porch, ducking under the hitchrail and gripping Fraser's hand. "Cleve! It's good to see you. But you stay away from your friends too long."

Liking this man and showing it, Fraser grinned. "The little animals are smart, Vance. When the snow piles thick they crawl into a hole and stay there. I figured it a good example to follow."

Vance Ogden's features were cleanly chiseled and his hair showed curly and tawny as ripe wheat as he took off his hat and turned to Leslie Cormack. He was jaunty and carried himself with a flair that made his every move smooth and effortless. He spoke across his shoulder.

"Don't mind you riding to town with my best girl, Cleve. But from here on I take over."

He held up his hand to Les who, as she took it and dismounted, gave him a smile that was warm and sweet. They moved off along the street, a handsome pair. Fraser watched them for a moment, then turned, dragging his spurs across the porch and thumbing at a pocket.

"List of grub here, Henry. Lot of air-tights and sweet stuff in it. Out at the ranch the boys have been fighting rough fare so much they're turning siwash on me."

Henry Poe nodded, gave the list a brief glance, then let his eyes swing to follow Leslie Cormack and Vance Ogden.

"Think a lot of those two, don't you, Cleve?"

"Of course. We more or less grew up together."

"She's a grand girl," said Poe. "I hope she'll never be sorry."

A ripple ran across Fraser's jaw, pulling it up long and hard. His voice went slightly rough. "Damn a gossip, Henry. You've said both too much and too little. What in hell are you driving at?"

The storekeeper laid his level glance on Fraser. "I've watched my share of men and I've seen some of them grow and some of them shrivel. Vance is a likable cuss, a pleasant man to be around. But he's got one damn bad habit."

"Name it," rapped Fraser.

"Poker, Cleve."

Fraser's laugh was brittle, without mirth. "What the devil! You can't damn a man for turning an occasional card, Henry."

"No," agreed Poe, "you can't. But Vance doesn't turn just an occasional one. He's been turning them all winter and with such poor success he's begun borrowing from his friends. Why do you think he was holding down my porch this morning? Not because the sun was shining for a change. But to talk up another loan, the third in the past ten days."

Fraser was completely still, his eyes pinching down at the corners. "Any man can find himself in need of a few dollars."

"Three hundred isn't a few, Cleve," said Henry Poe quietly. "Not when they're used to play poker with. Get me right. I'm no gossip and I'm not

crying about the money. But the Cormacks are my old and valued friends and I think as much of Les as I would a daughter of my own. You're my friend and so is Vance. I'm talking because I don't want any of you hurt. You've always been able to handle Vance. Get hold of him, Cleve, and shake some sense into him."

Poe would have turned into his store but Fraser dropped a hand on his arm.

"Sorry I got wringy, Henry. Should have known you'd do only what you believed right. I'm glad you spoke up. Who with and where has Vance been doing most of this poker playing?"

"In the High Front with Grat Mallory, Breshear, and Scarlett and a couple of others of Mallory's crew. I'm not the only one to notice it. Stack Portland knows and doesn't like it at all, for he holds a couple of Vance's notes. A little poker, Cleve, never hurt any man. But too much of it can pull him apart."

Saying this, Henry Poe went inside. Fraser stayed where he was, staring at the street, mechanically twisting up a cigarette. He was still there, the cigarette a dead butt on his lip, when Alec and Sarah Cormack came rolling into town in the buckboard.

Chapter Two

Conflict Acres

THE government land agent was named Styles, a short, brisk man. He wasted little time in getting at the business which had brought him across the desert to Mineral. Burt Statler, who knew Styles, had offered his law office as a place in which to hold the sale, and at this moment it was pretty well crowded.

Alec Cormack was there, raw-boned, bluff-jawed, ruddy of cheek, with blue eyes glinting under shaggy brows that had begun to frost up with a touch of grizzle. Art Wilcoxon, lean and spare and soldier-straight, was on hand. Dab Shurtleff had taken over one of the few chairs and filled it with his slightly paunchy bulk, a cigar sending curling smoke up past his blocky face. Pete Jackson, frowsy and untidy and with run-over boots, squatted against a far wall and alongside him was Jim Lear, with his pointed, foxy face, his shriveled leatheriness, and his acid, cantankerous tongue.

Heading for Statler's office, Cleve Fraser saw Stack Portland come out of his bank and hurry that way. Fraser quickened his stride. If Stack Portland had decided to sit into this thing to the limit, Grat Mallory would have a stiff fight on his hands. As Fraser reached Statler's door, Vance Ogden came angling across from the hotel. He grinned.

"You and me got as much right sitting in on this as we would to try and run for governor, Cleve."

"Always fun to look and listen," Fraser said briefly.

They went in and stood against the wall to the left of the door. On the far side of the portal, Grat Mallory had a shoulder point against the wall, watching proceedings with a shade of amusement on his smooth, dark face. He had the look of a man enjoying some secret joke all his own. He seemed unworried and supremely confident, as though this deal was already his, signed, sealed, and delivered. On the floor between his feet was a satchel of scuffed leather.

When Fraser went in he felt Mallory's glance and he swung his head to meet it, seeing in this man someone he did not like and never could. Physically, Mallory was big and rugged enough, and not a bad-looking man. His hair was dark, his features balanced and without blemish. His eyes were black and had a trick of going blank and veiled and completely unreadable when under hard scrutiny. There was a smoothness about him which Fraser bluntly catalogued as slick. A man might guess at what was going on in Mallory's mind, but he could never be sure.

Styles, the land agent, glanced at his watch, then droned through a copy of the posted sale announcement. That done with, he laid the paper down and looked around.

"The sale is open, gentlemen. Give me a bid."

"Ten thousand," was Alec Cormack's prompt reply.

"Eleven," said Art Wilcoxon quietly.

"Twelve," came back Cormack.

Dab Shurtleff took his cigar from his heavy lips, surveyed it gravely, then grunted. "Fifteen."

Pete Jackson cleared his throat harshly, seemed about to speak, but instead gnawed a corner off a plug of tobacco and stared at the floor. Pete was a cautious man with money; it hurt him to spend any of it, even for the rarest kind of bargain. Apparently he had already decided that the pace was going to be entirely too stiff for him.

Art Wilcoxon, seeing that Jackson wasn't getting in, said, "Sixteen thousand."

Dab Shurtleff sagged a little deeper into his chair and shrugged his beefy shoulders. "Sixteen five."

"Seventeen," growled Alec Cormack.

There was a slight pause, the room going quiet. Styles looked around inquiringly. So far, Grat Mallory hadn't said a word. But now he made his first bid and he hiked things stiffly.

"Twenty thousand."

Alec Cormack and Art Wilcoxon both threw measuring glances at Mallory. So did white-haired Stack Portland who, standing at Alec Cormack's shoulder, had been completely silent. Mallory met the glances with slightly crinkled black eyes. Mallory was enjoying this.

"Twenty-one thousand," said Art Wilcoxon, with a lingering reluctance. Wilcoxon was getting close to his limit.

"Twenty-two," rumbled Alec Cormack, bristling.

Now Dab Shurtleff surprised. "Twenty-three," he said grimly.

Grat Mallory took over with another bold jump. "Twenty-five."

Art Wilcoxon made a hard, cutting motion with his hand and said disgustedly, "Hell with it!" He turned and walked out. Now it was between Alec Cormack, Dab Shurtleff, and Grat Mallory, with Stack Portland still silent.

"Twenty-six thousand," gritted Dab Shurtleff.

"Twenty-six five," said Alec Cormack stubbornly.

Dab Shurtleff threw the chewed butt of his cigar into a corner. "All right, Alec. Mallory is all your cat now. See if you can skin him."

"Tough chore, Shurtleff," mocked Mallory. "Twenty-seven thousand."

Watching closely, Cleve Fraser saw hesitation and doubt take hold of Alec Cormack, saw a shadow of weariness pull at his face. And he did not miss the smug glitter in Mallory's eyes.

"I can scrape up maybe ten thousand, Alec," Fraser offered. "It's yours if you want it. Stay with him!"

Mallory's lounging shoulder came away from the wall and he half turned, his voice lashing thin across the room.

"This is a man's game, Fraser. Pikers stay out!"

Fraser's eyes began to smoke up and darken. "Don't get too proud all at once, Mallory. Well, Alec?"

Cormack shook his head. "Good of you, Cleve—but I'll play it this way."

Styles, the government man, spoke up. "Twenty-seven thousand I'm bid—"

Alec Cormack looked at Stack Portland, who nodded. "Twenty-eight," said Cormack.

"Twenty-nine," rapped Mallory. He was truculent, now.

Cormack sighed deeply. "Thirty thousand."

"Thirty-one," snapped Mallory.

Cormack looked at Stack Portland again and this time Portland shook his head. Cormack said simply, "I'm done."

Styles turned to Mallory. "A cash deal, you understand?"

Mallory said, "Sure. I know that. And I got it—here." He caught up the leather satchel, swaggered to the desk.

Alec Cormack and Stack Portland tramped out. Fraser and Vance Ogden followed. Then came Dab Shurtleff with Pete Jackson and Jim Lear. Vance Ogden gave a light laugh. "That's the way it goes."

Fraser said nothing, darkness still smoking up his eyes. Alec Cormack and Stack Portland were on the way to Portland's bank.

Dab Shurtleff looked around and said, "I've a feeling that some of us just lost our shirts. But I'll buy a drink."

They trooped over to the High Front. Art Wilcoxon was there, brooding over a whisky. As Fraser dropped in at the bar beside him, Wilcoxon tipped his head.

"Hell of a note, Cleve. A johnny-come-lately like Mallory. He got it, of course?"

"He got it," answered Fraser bluntly. "But he could have been stopped."

"How? He had it in the bag. Rest of us were just punching empty air—just going through the motions."

"That's right, Art—you were. As individuals. But if you'd got together and pooled your money, you could have licked him. Instead you were all a little greedy, trying to grab off the prize all alone. So you got nothing and Mallory got it all."

Wilcoxon stared at his glass. "Why now, you've got something there, Cleve."

At the pool table in the rear, Loop Scarlett and Chess Breshear were knocking the balls around. Observing the gloom at the bar they both grinned. They knew which way the cat had jumped.

"Well, anyhow," said Pete Jackson, "he didn't get it for nothin'. He had to go past thirty thousand. That's a pretty fair chunk of money."

"He didn't have to go that high because of anything you or Jim Lear did," reminded Shurtleff caustically. "Neither of you opened your yaps."

"What the hell!" grumbled Johnson. "That game was way too fast for Jim or me, right from the start. And when a man can't afford to buy chips he's smart to keep his mouth shut."

"No use throwin' rocks at one another," put in Wilcoxon. "It's over and done with and Mallory's got it."

"Right!" agreed Shurtleff. "He's got

it. But something tells me nothing is over and done with. This could be just the start of a lot of things."

A moody silence fell, each man considering Dab Shurtleff's words and comparing them with his own private estimate of the future. It was Vance Ogden who finally spoke in his usual careless shoulder-shrugging way.

"I guess the sun will go on rising and setting, same as always."

Dab Shurtleff looked at him, a certain thinly veiled contempt in his eyes. "Sometimes that salve gets a little thick, Ogden. So far you've always managed to find a hole in the fence to crawl through. But you're due one of these days to bump into a fence without any hole in it. When you do, I'm wondering if you'll have the stuff to climb over it."

Vance flushed and tipped his drink. The door of the High Front swung and Grat Mallory came in. He gave his satchel a slide toward the pool table.

"Watch that, Chess," he ordered. "There's still plenty in it." He spun a chair from under a poker table and sat down, pushing his legs well ahead and smiling as he lit a cigar.

"Right now," he announced loudly, "is a good time for an understanding all around. About Bunchgrass Basin. Some changes in policy are in order. Here's the first one. Starting now, every blade of grass in that basin is for Rafter X cattle, no others. I'm allowing just ten days for all other brands to get their last stray off Bunchgrass. After that time limit they'll be choused to hell an' gone and where they end up is no concern of mine. Now here is something else. All roads and trails across any part of Bunchgrass are closed to any and everybody except Rafter X men. That means—keep off basin land. I mean—off! Is that understood?"

There was a short silence, then Dab Shurtleff swung his glance around. "See what I meant when I said nothing was over and done with?"

Cleve Fraser, his drink still untouched, pushed away from the bar and stepped out to face Mallory. There was dark smoke in his eyes and little ripples of tautness flicked the hard angle of his jaw.

"Mallory," he said softly, "I want to hear you say that again. The last part, I mean. You've bought Bunchgrass and it's yours. Up to a certain point. You can hog the grass. But the town trail from Saber and Shield and Cross cuts across the lower end of Bunchgrass. Are you trying to tell me that trail is now closed?"

Mallory's smooth, dark smile reached tauntingly through the smoke of his cigar. "Your hearing must be bad, Fraser. I couldn't have made it any plainer."

Now the room did go quiet and a thin tension crept all across it. Back at the pool table Chess Breshear and Loop Scarlett laid aside their cues and came forward a few steps. At the bar, Art Wilcoxon caught Dab Shurtleff's eye, who nodded. So now these two turned and laid their strict attention on Breshear and Scarlett. Pete Jackson and Jim Lear eased toward the far end of the bar, an air of complete neutrality about them. Vance Ogden did not move.

Fraser paid no attention to any of this. He stood in front of Mallory, his boring glance a solid and unswerving force. Under the impact of it, Mallory's smile became a set grimace, his black eyes taking on that shallow blankness. It was as though he had drawn a cur-

tain across his mind, hiding it completely. Fraser's words came, low and brittle.

"So you think you're that big, eh Mallory? Well now, hear this. I'll be moving back and forth along that trail to town whenever I feel like it. So will my riders. Knowing the man, it's my guess Alec Cormack will feel the same way about it. Just how do you propose to stop us?"

"I'll close the trail my own way," retorted Mallory thinly. "I'll be particularly definite with you, Fraser. I never did like the way you rode down any trail or street. Cormack's bidding for Bunchgrass was legitimate. Your piker offer to back his hand wasn't. You made it plain then that you'd like nothing better than to plant your boots on me. And when any piker takes a bite at me I got my own kind of answer for them."

"Piker, piker, piker," said Fraser, soft as the breeze. "Three times you've used the word. Only my friends can call me names. Mallory, you need cutting down to size!"

Fraser took a short, quick stride. His open hand shot out, the hard palm and spread fingers framing Mallory's face, the pressure making a wreck of Mallory's cigar. Then Fraser straightened his bent elbow with a snap. Mallory and his chair went over backward, the crash a hard racket through the room.

Mallory turned almost completely over, landing on the broad of his shoulders. He spat a curse and was trying to get at his gun when Fraser kicked the chair out of the way and dropped on him. He wrestled Mallory's gun from him and sent it skittering to one side. Then he sat back, jerked Mallory to his feet, and flung him against the poker table.

"Have a swing, Grat!" he invited wickedly.

Mallory let one go and Fraser took it high on a hunched left shoulder as he stepped inside and hit Mallory twice in the body, solid, smashing blows. Mallory gasped and grabbed at him. They wrestled back and forth, two big men, well matched in weight and height.

At the rear of the room, Chess Breshear and Loop Scarlett split up and began sliding forward, one on either side. Art Wilcoxon flagged them down with a hard wave of his hand.

"Let be, you two!" he rapped. "This is between Cleve and Mallory—about a trail."

"Right!" seconded Dab Shurtleff, a far more dangerous man than he looked. "About a trail. Whether it stays open or is closed. Don't try anything foolish, boys!"

In the test of sheer strength, Fraser began to win an advantage, the two savage body blows having done Mallory little good. So now Mallory gave back suddenly, pulled clear, and drove a hard hook to the side of Fraser's neck. It was a shrewd blow and it staggered Fraser. Before he could recover he took another, glancingly across his face. It cut his lips and brought the warm seep of blood.

Sight of the crimson stain set Mallory off. He swarmed in, both fists swinging. Fraser crouched, arms about his head. He took a smash to the body and a ripping uppercut to his bruised mouth. He backed away a stride, straightened, and shot out a driving left. The punch caught Mallory coming in, snapped his head back, and set him up for the winging right that followed.

This was easily the hardest blow yet

thrown. It hung Mallory on his heels, wavering and wide open. Fraser went in fast and sank both fists into Mallory's body again, grunting with the savage effort he put behind the blows. They caught Mallory with his belly muscles flaccid and loose and hurt him wickedly. He sagged back against the poker table and nearly fell as the table skidded away from his reeling weight.

Fraser was waiting when Mallory straightened and turned. He uncoiled from his very heels and the shock of the blow, catching Mallory fairly on his wobbling jaw, left Fraser's arm and wrist slightly numb. Mallory went down in a long sprawl, staying there, sick and retching and only half-conscious.

For a long moment Fraser stood over him, watching. Then Fraser's head came up and he put a challenging stare on Loop Scarlett and Breshear. They met the look, but that was all.

Fraser turned back to the bar and at a glance read the significance of the positions and attitudes of the men there. He nodded his thanks to Art Wilcoxon and Dab Shurtleff and said, a trifle hoarsely, "This drink is on me. Pipe, a bar towel—a clean one."

Pipe Orr, who owned the High Front and did his own bar chores, supplied the towel and Fraser dabbed the blood from his face. He looked at Vance Ogden, saw what was behind Vance's forced grin and said with some curtness:

"If it's not there, don't try and cover it up."

Then he turned back to the bar and so did not see the dull color flame in Vance's handsome face.

The whisky stung Fraser's battered lips, but took some of the raw rasp out of his throat. Art Wilcoxon called for another and lifted his glass.

"To a trail kept open, Cleve. Man! You took him apart!"

"Thereby, we hope," growled Dab Shurtleff, "reducing a hat size."

Reaction set in. Fraser downed his second drink, laid some money on the bar, and went out into the open sunlight of the street, not at all satisfied with himself. So he'd whipped Mallory in a fist-swinging, but what had the brawl proven and what good had it done? It hadn't reduced Mallory's power in any way and now Mallory would hate him worse than ever and be tougher about Bunchgrass.

Fraser twisted up a cigarette, lipped it gingerly. Now that he had begun to relax he realized he had burned up a lot of energy in there. He let his big shoulders go slack and, as he recalled his remark to Vance Ogden, knew another gust of anger at himself.

Knowing and liking Vance, he had long ago realized what Vance had and what he lacked. Vance had never been a fighter, not in a physical sense. His way was an easy, smiling, cheerful acceptance of life, which saw no sense in beating up another man or in getting beat up himself.

Was Vance to be blamed if he hadn't been born with the raw, black physical will to move into a fight, or even invite it? That sort of thing was cheap enough; some of the most surly, worthless whelps Fraser had ever met possessed that. It was easy not to be afraid when a man didn't know what fear was. Often had Fraser envied Vance his gay and easy charm. Maybe in the long run that sort of thing could get a man more than all the rough violence in the world.

The smoke of the cigarette was a bitter rasp across his raw lips, so in

sudden distaste Fraser tossed it away, considered the street for another period of dark brooding, and was about to head for Henry Poe's store when the doors of the High Front swung and Vance Ogden came out. Fraser dropped a quick hand on Vance's arm.

"Sorry, fella. That was a mean crack in there and I'm taking it back."

There was a flush on Vance's face and a faintly bitter smile on his lips. "Why take it back? It's true. I haven't the nerve of a rabbit in a fight. Never did have. I'd give plenty to have some of your burly brute in me."

"Right now you can have it all," said Fraser. "I'm fed up with myself. I'll trade for the instincts of a gentleman, any time."

"Forget it," said Vance. "I have."

Vance said it easily enough, but there was something in his manner to belie the words. He would have gone his way, but Fraser said, "Hold it a minute, cowboy." Then, because he knew no other way to go at a problem but tackling it directly and with both hands, Fraser said doggedly, "You in need of money?"

Vance's faint smile grew set. "What gave you that idea?"

"This and that. If you are, come to me. Only—"

"Only—what?"

"When a man has to borrow money to pay his poker debts, he's playing too much poker. Winter's over, kid. Lot of range to ride now, lot of cows to chouse. Tell me how much you need to get squared away and with that off the books we'll start polishing saddle leather again."

Vance's set smile faded out. He stared off at nothing, but he spoke distinctly, setting each word down sharply.

"My thanks and all that sort of thing, Cleve. But there's some things in my life I don't want you prying into. Suppose we understand that, once and for all!"

Vance pulled away from Fraser's hand and walked off.

Fraser stared after him for a space and then, in sudden disgust for the way this whole day had turned out, headed for Henry Poe's store, determined to pick up his grub order and go home. But Alec Cormack came out of Stack Portland's bank and intercepted him.

"Want you to know I appreciated your offer, Cleve. But I was already bidding against Mallory on Stack Portland's money and had no right to drag you in." Cormack's eyes narrowed. "Who hit you?"

Fraser briefly explained his set-to with Mallory. "He was pretty starchy over getting Bunchgrass and I let his talk get under my skin. Guess I made a damn fool of myself, Alec."

Cormack swung a wrathful head. "The man's too big for his britches, Cleve. Hell with him! We'll use the town trail same as always, and let's see him stop us. Now there's something else that Stack Portland was telling me about," went on the grizzled cattleman grimly. "Something I don't like—don't like at all."

"Yeah?" murmured Fraser. "What's that?" But he knew what it was, even as he asked.

"It's Vance. He's been playing too much poker and losing too much money at it."

"Heard some talk of that," parried Fraser cautiously. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. He'll snap out of it."

"Now he damn well better!" vowed

Cormack. "I know man is a cussed poor excuse of an animal, take him by and large, so I don't expect the one who marries my daughter to be a saint. Still and all, he's got to be able to take his liquor or leave it alone. And he's got to have the brains and backbone to know when it's time to get up and walk away from a poker table. There's no place in my family for any man who can't do either or both of those two things. That includes Vance Ogden. You staying in town overnight, Cleve?"

"I'd figured to when I came in," nodded Fraser. "Now I'm not so sure. Why?"

"Sarah says you're to have supper with us at the hotel. Better not disappoint her."

Over at the High Front, Grat Mallory and his two riders, Breshear and Scarlett, came out. Breshear had Mallory by the elbow, steadying him, while Scarlett carried Mallory's leather satchel. Mallory shook off Breshear's aiding hand and climbed into his saddle, needing a distinct effort to do so. As they came down the street at a jog Breshear and Scarlett showed only a wary surliness, but Mallory, face bruised and swollen, eyelids puffed, laid a glance on Cleve Fraser that was ophidian and glittering.

"You definitely mussed him up, Cleve," observed Cormack. "Now he'll hate you clear past hell."

"That," said Fraser dryly, "I can stand. But his friendship would wither me."

Cormack studied Fraser gravely. "I've known you ever since you were a lanky kid, yet at times I don't completely understand you. Like today. Bunchgrass Basin means less to you, actually, than to any of the rest of us. You've never grazed cattle on it to any extent, nor your father before you. Your range is all well west and higher up. So you've really no heavy cause to quarrel with Mallory. Yet, when the bidding was going on you stood willing to back me to your full limit. And just now you let some gas out of Mallory's balloon over in the High Front. I wonder about those things."

Fraser teetered back and forth from heel to toe, considering. "Some men, like toadstools, grow in dark corners and feed on superior matter, Alec. Mallory strikes me as that sort. Put it down that I just don't like the man. We ruffed feathers at each other the first time we ever met. I guess it will always be that way."

"Well," said Cormack, "when you clouted him you did something I'd like to have done myself. The man's come along awful fast and there's a smugness in him. He's got power behind him somewhere. I wish I knew where, and how much."

"That, I think, we'll find out in time," Fraser said.

On the porch of the Timberline Hotel, which stood at the far end of the street, Mrs. Cormack appeared and waved a beckoning arm. Alec Cormack started off.

"There's Sarah, calling me for something. Don't forget about supper, Cleve. You're expected."

Came noon, Fraser sauntered out to a long, low building at the edge of town where he was welcomed by one Pio Cardenas, who was leathery-dark with merry eyes. Savory odors drifted

from an open door.

Fraser said, "I've fed on ranch grub all winter, Pio—until it all tastes like sawdust. I've a hunger for something hot and full of bite to bring my appetite back."

Pio's eyes twinkled. "You are just in time, *amigo*. My Maria but now is putting it on the table."

Over past years, Fraser had eaten with these people many times, for they were friends of long standing. Short like her spouse, but considerably broader, Maria Cardenas knew kindliness equal to her bulk. There was also a daughter, Teresa, plainly the magnet which had drawn young Danny Cope to this same generous table.

Danny Cope was a yellow-headed, reckless, devil-may-care kid who had, at one time or another, drawn wages from nearly every outfit in the Sentinel country. He hailed Fraser cheerfully.

"When you set out to curry down a short horse, Cleve, why don't you spread the word first, so a man could be there and see the fun?"

"Sometimes the idea hits all of a sudden, Danny," answered Fraser dryly. "And it wasn't all fun." He touched a finger to his cut lips. "Who you signing on with, kid, for spring roundup?"

Danny shrugged carelessly. "Hadn't thought about it yet."

"When you find the time, how about giving Saber a tumble? I'll guarantee to work some of the salt out of you."

Danny grinned. "That I well know."

The meal over, Fraser and Pio Cardenas went into the latter's workshop at the far end of the building. Here, in a room cluttered with saddles, riatas, headstalls, bridles, and all manner of leather goods, Pio's nimble fingers performed magic with awl and wax end. Men saved wages carefully and rode long distances to buy items of equipment from Pio Cardenas. And because Pio was a good and shrewd listener, there was no better place to glean little items of range news than right here in this shop.

Fraser, musing over a cigarette, observed gravely, "Been a pretty tough winter, Pio. Brands scattered everywhere. Now if I had ideas about the other fellow's cattle, I'd figure the setup as just right. It's an idea some may be playing with."

Pio, already at work at his bench, ducked a round head. "Some men are that way, Señor Cleve. And it is very bad business."

"You hear things," went on Fraser, "and you see things. Small things, maybe, yet things that tell a big story sometimes. And from time to time you and me have little talks together. That is true, isn't it?"

Gray eyes and black ones met in understanding. Pio nodded again. Fraser smiled grimly and moved to the door.

"Your Maria is a wonderful cook, Pio. Thank her for me."

Back again on the street, Fraser dropped into the High Front, looking for Vance Ogden, for the uncomfortable note on which they had parted still nagged him. But the High Front was empty except for Pipe Orr behind the bar and Art Wilcoxon playing solitaire at a poker table. Pipe reported that Vance had been in again, just before noon and had said something about heading out for home. Which news troubled Fraser more than ever.

For he knew that behind Leslie Cormack's visit to town had been the eagerness to see Vance. Now, if Vance had pulled out it would be because of the remarks Fraser had made with the harsh fires of anger burning in him.

So he'd hurt Les Cormack as well as Vance. He looked across the bar.

"Temper, Pipe," he said morosely, "can make the damnedest fool of a man."

He bought a cigar, then went over and pulled out a chair across from Art Wilcoxon. "Where's Shurtleff and Jackson and Lear, Art?"

Wilcoxon grunted. "Headed out. I tried to drum up a little game of draw, but no go. Jackson and Lear in particular seemed worried about their stock, saying the winter had scattered them from hell to breakfast."

"Reminds me," murmured Fraser. "Saw some sign when I was coming in across Bunchgrass this morning."

Wilcoxon quit shoving the cards around and his head lifted. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Maybe a dozen or fifteen head of critters, with two riders chousing them. I ran the sign down a ways to make sure where it headed. It lined straight for the upper end of Bunchgrass."

Wilcoxon scrubbed his chin with thumb and forefinger. "The direction is all sour, Cleve. Now if they'd been bringing the cattle this way, toward lower range, where they'd be handy to pick up in roundup, it would have made sense. As it was—!"

"You got it, Art. We're going to have our troubles this year, I'm afraid."

Wilcoxon's face went harsh. "They will try it, won't they? The damn fools! Risk their necks against a rope, just for a few head of critters. Well, should I come up with any of them, they'll get what they're asking for."

Fraser touched a fresh match to his cigar. "Good of you and Shurtleff to keep Breshear and Scarlett off my neck a while ago. Appreciate it."

Wilcoxon snorted. "Think nothing of it. Mallory had just announced the rules, hadn't he? Him against the world. Well, if that's the way he wants it, that's the way it'll be."

Chapter Three

Grim Portent

AT A little past mid-afternoon, Hoot McCall brought the stage from Canyon City swaying into town behind a lathered team of six. He hauled up in front of the hotel and while Jerry Pine and a couple of hostlers led the tired team away and brought up a fresh one from Jerry's stable, Hoot went into the hotel for a bait of grub.

When the stage was ready to roll again on its next leg of the route across the desert to rail's end at Breed's Junction, Henry Poe carried a slim mailbag over for Hoot to stow in the front boot. Styles, the government land agent, done with the chore that had brought him to Mineral, came out of the hotel and climbed into the stage, carrying a well stuffed and soundly locked brief case. Hoot McCall hitched his gaunt lankiness up to the box and the Concord rumbled downstreet and turned into the desert, leather thorough braces sending back their dry, complaining creak.

Cleve Fraser killed considerable time in Payette's barbershop, emerging finally with a haircut and with lips reduced of much of their swelling by a series of hot-towel compresses. He had now decided to make a night of it in town and take up the supper invitation with the Cormack family.

At this early season of the year, day

shortened sharply, once the sun began to dip, and winter's lingering chill made itself felt. Fraser stood on the porch of Henry Poe's store and watched a bearded squatter from over in the Heckleman Ford country hurriedly load up some supplies and then urge his spring-wagon team out of town at a ponderous trot. Measuring distance against day's hastening end, Fraser knew the man was in for a cold dark ride before reaching the comfort of his own fireside. If it was comfort, in some fragile lath-and-tar-paper shanty.

Knowing what the impact of winter had been on people living behind far stouter walls, Fraser could guess at the hardships the squatter and his family had faced in the months past. And he marveled at the courage and sheer tenacity of such folk. There had to be, he mused, a deathless love of the earth to hold them to their poor acres and frugal dwellings.

Behind him, Henry Poe closed the store door against the bite of the wind now beginning to sweep down from the snowy, frigid heights of the distant Sentinels. Day's temporary warmth was completely gone now. Come morning, there would be ice in the muddy ruts of the street.

Earlier, Fraser had taken both his dun and Leslie Cormack's sorrel mount over to Jerry Pine's stable. Now he went over there to give both animals a currying and see that they were well bedded for a cold night. Gloom deepened in the stable and when Fraser came out into the street again, it was to face a chill, blue dusk.

Miles out in the desert, Hoot McCall got into an ankle-long, sheepskin-lined canvas coat, wrapped a ragged old muffler around his neck and ears and settled back to stoic it out to Breed's Junction, which was a long five hours away. Hoot had been at this sort of thing for the best part of his life and the worst of winter's biting cold and summer's blasting heat had turned him leathery and tough and built up in him a vast capacity for gruff and uncomplaining silence.

On all sides the desert ran away, black and empty, trapped by the down-pressing cone of the heavens, with the stars beginning to glitter frostily through a high-forming haze. The earth's moist dankness pushed odors up and the warm breath of the steadily traveling team washed back to Hoot, bringing its own comfort to a man who had lived all his life with horses. The road had its rough spots, but it was comparatively straight all the way to Breed's Junction and the wise and willing team could be depended upon to virtually drive itself. So Hoot let his faculties drop far back and he stole a few moments of dozing, every now and then.

He was jerked out of one of these periods when the even cadence of the team's travel broke sharply, the leaders rearing back and blocking the balance of the team. Hoot, wide awake on the instant, peered ahead into the blackness.

He saw the round bloom of gunflame and felt the smash of the bullet at the same instant. The slug hit him in the left shoulder high up, and the impact swayed him back and toppled him across the box, from where, dazed and sick, he slid down to huddle on the footboard.

Figures, only the vaguest of shadows against the earth's cold blackness, closed in on either side of the stage, yanking open the doors. Styles, the

government land agent and sole passenger, jerked from uneasy drowse, had stout stuff in him. He had a gun in a shoulder holster and he went for it, for he was a faithful man and there was thirty-one thousand dollars of government money in that brief case of his.

But Styles was stiff and clumsy with the cold and he had on an overcoat, tightly buttoned. Before he could get at his gun an exploring hand had settled on his ankle. A savage pull hauled him half off the seat. He tried to kick free, found he couldn't, so dove at the owner of that tenacious hand. Styles went through the open stage door cleanly, crashing into someone who staggered back, cursing.

Styles was free, but the impetus of his gallant try had him off balance and he landed on his hands and knees on the cold earth beside the stage. He was still in that position when a man stood over him and savagely pumped three heavy six-gun slugs into him. Styles flattened out and never stirred. So died a brave man, out in that cold and lonely desert.

The man who had done the shooting stepped past Styles's still figure and fumbled around in the stage's dark interior. He located the brief case, lifted it out, and his voice sounded low and harsh against the breathless silence that had closed in after the hard roll of smashing gun reports.

"I got it. Now let's get out of here!"

Hoot McCall did not go completely out. As though from some great distance he was conscious of the brief flurry of action in and about the stage, of the three hammering shots and of a few indistinct, growled words. After that the fading mutter of hoofs, leaving only the silence and the cold.

When the shock of his wound began to wear off slightly, the grim old stage whip stirred and managed to get back to his seat, where he hunched dizzily. Remembering something, he pawed around with his sound hand and from under a corner of the folded blankets which made his seat cushion brought out a pint whisky bottle, half full. He held the bottle between his knees, pulled the cork, and took a deep drag. The whisky bit in, warming him and driving away the fuzz that clung to his senses. He corked the bottle and put it in the deep side pocket of his long coat. A measure of strength began to return.

He thrust his right hand inside his coat and explored his wounded shoulder. There was warm and sticky blood in there, but it did not seem too bad, though his whole arm and shoulder was weak and useless and now began to set up a throbbing ache. It could, thought Hoot bleakly, have been a lot worse.

Remembering his passenger, he turned, leaned slightly over, and sent a harsh call. "How's it down there?"

There was no answer. Hoot went down off the stage very carefully. Reaching the ground, he did not take two steps before he stumbled over the body of Styles. Hoot dropped to one knee and ran his hand over the still figure. Touch was enough. This man was dead.

Hoot remembered that his passenger had carried a brief case with him when he got into the stage back at Mineral, so now Hoot explored the stage's interior for that. It wasn't there, so the picture was clear. He had, Hoot figured, the answer to the holdup. Now, what to do?

Hoot measured time and distance, his own condition and a number of

other factors. Though he was a considerable distance out from Mineral it was still a shorter stretch back to town than it was out ahead to Breed's Junction. And with only one good hand to work with, and weakened down as he was from his own wound, Hoot knew he had no chance of getting Styles back into the stage.

Hoot McCall's mind ran in simple, uncomplicated channels. He had his own code of ethics, which wasn't complicated, either. As Hoot saw it, it simply wouldn't be decent to drive on and leave that dead man there. Yet he couldn't stay here until someone came along, for that might well be a matter of days, as there was little travel along this stretch of lonely desert road except by his own stage and an occasional freighter, hauling in supplies to Mineral. Beside, he had only so much strength left, himself. The wounded shoulder was really beginning to punish him. Sticking close to hard logic, Hoot knew what he must do. He had to get back to Mineral.

This was the hungry season here in the desert and at the fag end of a tough winter. Without the stage around, the coyotes would not be long in finding the body of Styles. But with the stage standing by, that would hold them off. So, Hoot decided, he'd break a horse out of his team and ride it back.

He climbed painfully back to the box, set the brake up, hard. Of the team, he decided one of the wheelers would probably be the steadiest and least inclined to pitch with him. So he cut out one of these. It was slow and painful business, working in the dark and with only one hand.

The horse, a big solid bay, had been ridden before and showed no tendency to pitch, to Hoot's great relief. The animal was willing enough and moved out at a respectable jog. Again Hoot measured time and distance against his own capacity to endure, plus the amount of whisky left in the flask. It added up to a pretty tight finish. Hoot closed his mind into a narrow groove of determination and rode the night down.

Jonas Cain and his wife, Abbie, took pride in setting a good table in the dining-room of their Timberline Hotel. As a rule, diners ate off tables covered with spotlessly clean oilcloth, but when she wanted to and felt the occasion warranted it, Abbie Cain could spread one of those tables with real linen napery and lay it with fine ware and cutlery.

Being a long-time friend and confidante of Sarah Cormack, Abbie Cain had done herself proud and so, when Cleve Fraser clanked down the length of the dining-room to the Cormack table, he showed the dismay he felt.

"Pretty rich fare for a cowhand just out of the timber," he drawled. "This looks like an occasion, Mother Cormack."

Sarah Cormack shook her head, smiling. "Nothing special, Cleve. Just Abbie Cain showing off a bit. Sit you down and relax, boy. You'll do fully as well as Alec."

Alec Cormack grunted. "Abbie means well, but I wish she'd left out the extra fork. Always tangles me up."

There had been an extra place set and Fraser glanced at it.

"I'd hoped to have Vance with us," said Sarah Cormack. "But he must have had other business. I wanted to see the five of us around the same table again. So often I think back to the days when Leslie and you two boys, fresh

from some helter-skelter ride, would come charging into the ranch house to raid my kitchen like ravenous young wolves."

"Good days, Mother Cormack," nodded Fraser. "The best."

Sitting across from Leslie, Fraser saw that though she was faintly smiling and seemed easy and composed, there was a shadow in her eyes. That empty seat beside her—

She was a brave girl, never one to inflict her own troubled thoughts on others. Under the lamplight her hair took on an almost ruddy shine and the cast of her head and shoulders was very fine. This girl, he thought, would manage a smile through any misery and he paid her tribute with a steady, admiring glance. That she understood his thought he was certain, for she was always mentally alert and responsive to such things. He did not mind when she took refuge in a gentle jibing.

"You recover quickly, Cleve. Dad said it would be days before Grat Mallory looked normal. You show hardly any signs."

Fraser grinned. "If that's really so, thank Frenchy Payette. Used up nearly every towel in his barbershop, putting on compresses. Oh, I stopped a few with my face all right."

"Brawling in a saloon," she teased. "Aren't you ashamed?"

"Now, Leslie," said Mother Cormack, "Don't you pick at Cleve. I'm sure he had good reason to whip Mallory."

"Hah!" growled Alec Cormack. "Any reason is good enough for that. Cleve only did what a lot of us would like to do."

"Alec was telling me about Mallory's threat to block our trail to town," Mother Cormack said. "Do you think he really meant that, Cleve?"

Fraser nodded. "Maybe. He's drunk with his own importance."

"If he does try it, what will you do?" asked Leslie. "Wait! I'll bet I know. You'll use it anyhow."

"You could be right," Fraser admitted. Then he added, grinning, "How'd you guess?"

"Didn't have to guess. I know you, my friend. There's a broad stubborn streak in you. Bullheaded is another word for it. Like the time you wouldn't take me to the dance out at the old army post, when you knew I was dying to go. And why wouldn't you? Just because you knew the Lockyears were going to be there."

"In which," declared Mother Cormack, "Cleve showed better judgment than you, my dear, the Lockyears being the sort they are. They could have made trouble."

"Little Clevie wasn't afraid of trouble, Mother, because once before he licked that Lockyear pair. No, he was just being perverse."

"I declare!" exclaimed Mother Cormack spiritedly. "You're the one who is being perverse, Les. Leave the boy alone, so he can eat in peace."

Talk drifted into other channels and though Leslie managed to get in several more verbal jabs at Fraser, he enjoyed his meal thoroughly. When they got up to leave, Leslie dropped in beside him, tucked her hand into his, and murmured an apology.

"Sorry I was ornery, Cleve. But I just had to snap at somebody. He—he might have stayed in town long enough to eat with us."

Looking down at her, Fraser understood completely. There was just the faintest quiver of hurt on her lips. "Any old time it'll make you feel bet-

ter, Les, you just go ahead and spur me," he told her. "I won't mind a bit."

Her slim fingers tightened about his before she withdrew them, and she showed him the old brave smile again.

In the hotel parlor, Leslie and her mother and Abbie Cain drifted off together. Fraser talked with Alec Cormack and Jonas Cain for a while, bought cigars at the hotel bar, then went out. The night air hit him like a thin-edged knife. Overhead the stars were frosty. Fraser hurried his stride to the High Front, where he spent a comfortable evening playing three-handed cutthroat with Art Wilcoxon and Jerry Pine. When the ancient clock over Pipe Orr's bar bonged out eleven measured notes, Fraser went back to the now silent hotel, sought his room, and turned in.

He awoke in the cold dark, with Art Wilcoxon shaking his shoulder. Wilcoxon said curtly, "Come down to Jerry Pine's stable, Cleve," then hurried out without any further explanation.

Ice crunched under Fraser's boot heels in the ruts of the street. There was lantern light showing in Jerry Pine's harness room and the biting smell of iodoform was in the air. Doc Curtain was in there with Art Wilcoxon and Jerry Pine. Doc was working over someone on the wall bunk.

Fraser pushed in for a look. It was Hoot McCall, his leathery face pinched and seamed. Doc was bandaging Hoot's left shoulder. Art Wilcoxon moved over to the small stove in the corner and freshened the fire in it.

Fraser asked, "What is this?"

"Hoot was held up out in the desert," explained Jerry Pine. "He woke me up a little while ago when he stumbled in here, half frozen and out on his feet."

The bucket of water on the stove began to steam. Doc Curtain said, "Fill a glass half full of whisky, Art, and the rest with that hot water. There's a full pint in my bag."

They propped Hoot up and poured the hot drink into him. He groaned and opened his eyes. "Don't waste words, Hoot," ordered Doc, "but give us the story."

Hoot gave it, haltingly, then, under the influence of the drink and growing warmth, inside and out, plus his own weakness, sagged down and began to doze.

Doc Curtain heaped blankets over him, and said gruffly, "Tough old codger and a damned good man. He'll be all right."

Art Wilcoxon said bleakly, "Murder and robbery. That fellow Styles had thirty-one thousand dollars with him. This is rough business. Feel like a ride, Cleve?"

"Right with you," nodded Fraser.

"The stage has got to go through to Breed's Junction," said Jerry Pine. "I'll drive it. I'll take along a spare wheeler."

It was a cold and bitter ride, chasing down the long miles in these black, early-morning hours. Day was breaking grayly across the world when they reached the scene of the holdup. Everything was just as Hoot McCall left it, except that the five remaining horses of the team had swung around and bunched up in a mutual move against the cold. They straightened out the team and hitched in the wheeler Jerry Pine had brought along. They lifted the stiffened figure of Styles into the stage and then Jerry climbed to the box and kicked off the brake.

"I'll tell Bill Hammer all about it," he called down. "And I'll see you back in Mineral come sundown."

The stage went away with a rush, the chilled horses eager in their collars. Art Wilcoxon said, "What now, Cleve?"

"Wait for stronger daylight and then take a look around."

They built up smokes and went quiet with their thoughts. There was nothing to guess about in this affair. The bait had been large and the holdups had hit with ruthless efficiency. There was no doubt in Cleve Fraser's mind that the holdups had intended to leave two dead men behind them, and thought they had, what with the first shot knocking Hoot McCall down the way it had.

"How many do you think knew the amount Styles had with him, Cleve?" asked Wilcoxon abruptly.

"More than were present at the sale. It was hours after the sale before the stage pulled out of town. Plenty of time for the word to travel. That trail won't get us anywhere, Art."

"Be a smooth trick for Mallory to get Bunchgrass Basin and then get his money back, too," Wilcoxon growled.

"A conclusion too easy to jump at, Art. Safer to keep an open mind."

Wilcoxon spun his cigarette butt into the road. "You're dead right, of course. But a man wonders."

Day quickened its advance across the shivering miles. In the east a ragged spread of thin clouds began to reflect a faint flush of color. North, the distant Sentinels were a solid, black anchor at the rim of things. In the sage near by a desert wren struck up a brief chatter of sound, then went abruptly silent as though frightened at its own temerity. Far off, a coyote mourned hungrily. The earth and its various markings took on a distinctness.

Afoot, Fraser began a careful prowl. Sign was fairly clear and he was able to reconstruct things with reasonable accuracy.

"Three of them," he told Wilcoxon. "One blocked the road and shot Hoot McCall. The other two came up on either side of the stage and took care of Styles and the money. We'll see which way they rode after the job was done."

The trail led directly east and Fraser and Wilcoxon followed at a jog through the rank but scattered sage. "This," observed Art Wilcoxon, "ain't going to do us any good. You know where they're headed, Cleve?"

"Sure. Baker's Lake. This thing shows too shrewd figuring to have been cooked up on the spur of the moment. Maybe like it was planned weeks before the sale."

In the long view the desert seemed flat, but at close hand this was not so. It ran in long rolls and there were crests and depressions which asserted themselves almost imperceptibly. Some four miles from the scene of the holdup, Fraser and Wilcoxon topped one of these crests and the sun, just surging into view, struck a solid, reflected blaze into their eyes. Out ahead lay the sprawling extent of Baker's Lake.

At this time of year it was an expanse of water, at no place over a couple of feet deep. A mounted man could ride across any part of it and never wet his boots. By midsummer however, it would be only a mile-wide expanse of bleached and alkali-scabbed hardpan. The horse sign Fraser and Wilcoxon were following led straight to the water's edge and into it. Fraser reined up.

"They went in together, Art, but they wouldn't come out that way.

They'd scatter and come out at widely separated spots. With all this cattle sign around we'd never locate those spots. The trail ends here."

Wilcoxon nodded. "When Sheriff Bill Hammer shows up and wants to know, we'll tell him how far we came. This cattle sign—maybe we better take a little look around."

"No better time," agreed Fraser. "Come on!"

They worked south, then east around the ragged outline of water, which thrust a hundred different fingers into the sage. Out of any of these the bandits might have ridden, their sign mixed and lost in the cattle trails which cut back and forth. These trails puzzled Fraser somewhat, for as yet no single critter was to be seen.

With the bulk of the lake to the north of them, he and Wilcoxon topped the containing crest to the east of the lake and then saw plenty of cattle, milling about across a long sage flat. Now also, something whimpered through the air overhead and in the distance a rifle crashed flatly.

Surprise held for a moment. Then the distant rifle belted the echoes around again and this time the bullet spurted dust almost under the hoofs of Wilcoxon's horse. The animal whirled of its own accord and plunged back across the crest. Fraser spurred after it. Wilcoxon began cursing bitterly.

"Will I never learn!" he raged. "I could have strapped a rifle to my saddle before leaving home yesterday. Now here we are with just a belt gun apiece, while that so-and-so out there's got the range on us—! Cleve, what have we ridden into?"

Fraser did not answer. He was already out of his saddle, moving over to an outcrop of rock on the ridge crest. He clawed his way up the gray spine of this and looked over. Immediately that distant rifle clamored again and the bullet smashed solidly into the rock, the heat of its abruptly expended energy sending up a thinly acrid odor. Fraser dropped back and returned to his horse.

"Let's circle," he said, grimly brief.

They put their horses to a full run and when some distance south, cut over the crest once more. No more shots came, and they saw, far out, two bobbing riders, racing east. The distance was long, a good six or seven hundred yards now, and this, combined with the fact that the sun still blazed in their eyes, made any identification hopeless.

Equally useless was the thought of pursuit. Even if he and Wilcoxon succeeded in closing the gap somewhat, Fraser knew that rifle would go to work again, pecking away at them while they, with only belt guns, would be helpless in hitting back. So he pulled up again.

"It's going to be that kind of a year, Art," he said harshly. "We'll need a rifle under our leg at all times."

"Anyhow," said Wilcoxon, "they lost their nerve and rode for it. Let's take a look at these cattle."

They rode back up the flat, the cattle breaking out ahead and on either side of them. Fraser read his own brand and that of Alec Cormack's. Wilcoxon's Running W showed, as did Dab Shurtleff's Split Circle. A shaggy steer, charging across in front of them, carried Grat Mallory's Rafter X.

"Quite a gather," observed Wilcoxon

dryly. "Just about everybody represented. On purpose or by accident, would you say, Cleve?"

Fraser shrugged. "Could be the cattle bunched on their own. There's some grass showing in this flat. Yet, somebody was interested who didn't want to be recognized."

"Think those two could have been mixed in with the stage affair?" Wilcoxon hazarded. "And maybe watching their back trail?"

Fraser shook his head. "Don't think so. The stage holdups would have too much on their minds to be sniffing around a little bunch of cattle strays. And no point in watching back on a trail already gone cold. Probably we showed up just in time to keep a couple of wavering cowhands honest."

Riding back to town, Wilcoxon said, "We'll be smart to call roundup a little early, Cleve. Busy boys with hungry ropes won't be quite so ambitious if they know roundup crews are ramming here and yonder across the country. Give 'em a funny feeling in their necks."

"We'll have to buck a late storm or two," Fraser decided. "But I can stand the misery of a few wet roundup camps if it means protecting my own. We'll put the idea to Cormack and the others."

At Mineral they found the town restless and buzzing over the news of the holdup. Burt Statler called Fraser into his office for what new word he carried. Fraser told him all he knew.

"Jack Styles," said Statler soberly, "was a damn good man. They must have shot him down like a dog."

"Three times—in the back," nodded Fraser. "A dirty business, Burt."

The Cormacks, Fraser found, had left for home fairly early that morning. So he went over to Henry Poe's store and picked up his sack of grub. Poe told him that Hoot McCall was coming along and observed that Hoot was a lucky man.

Fraser said, "Country is roughing up, Henry."

When he had climbed to the elevation of Bunchgrass, Fraser rode a trifle warily, wondering if Grat Mallory had already taken steps to fulfill his threat of closing the trail. But he saw no sign of riders anywhere and the wheel marks of Alec Cormack's buckboard cut straight through.

Bunchgrass lay empty to the farthest reach of the eye. There was a somewhat bare and desolate look to it now, but this would quickly change once the spring sun had a chance to work on it. Then grass knee-high to a tall horse would lie in shimmering waves across it, and it would all be Grat Mallory's grass. Come summer, the green would turn to a golden tawniness, and the richness of its color would be the omen of its worth. It was the kind of grass cattlemen had warred over since the first range boundaries had been argued.

Thinking these things, Cleve Fraser could once more appreciate the canny wisdom that grim old Duncan Fraser, his father, had shown in never, even from the first, wanting any part of Bunchgrass.

"It is better, my son," Duncan Fraser had once said to Cleve, "to have less, when that less is all yours, and so placed that other men will not likely covet it, than to claim to something that is very rich and which all men will want and try and take from you. I see more than grass in Bunchgrass Basin. I see black hatreds and bloodshed. That day will surely come."

The gaunt old Scotchman had not lived to see his predictions come true, but that day, mused Cleve Fraser, could easily be in the near offing. The trouble would not come over the question of ownership, for that issue was now settled. Grat Mallory and his combine owned it. Trouble, if it came, would be over what Mallory might now cast his eye on and, seeing it as something he wanted, begin to force an issue. For as Soddy Joens had said, grass hunger was like gold hunger with some men. They could never get enough of it.

At Shield and Cross headquarters, Alec Cormack and his foreman, Sam Tepner, were checking over some necessary repairs of feed sheds and corrals caused by the past winter's ravages. Cormack asked for the latest on the stage holdup. Fraser told what he knew and also told of the cattle he and Art Wilcoxon had run into out by Baker's Lake and of the long-range rifle fire he and Wilcoxon had encountered.

"Barefaced as that, eh?" growled Cormack. He brooded a moment. "Quicker we set honest riders to combing the range the better herd count we'll come up with. I'm ready to call roundup any time."

Passing the ranch house on his way through, Fraser saw no sign of Leslie Cormack. Although she was never one to parade a hurt before others, yet there was a great capacity for depth of feeling in her. If she knew the need for tears, no one else would see them, for she had strong pride. Vance Ogden, mused Fraser a little savagely, should have stayed on for that supper in town.

Of course, he himself was to blame to some extent. He'd used the rawhide on Vance, who had gone off angry. So they were both responsible for laying the shadow across Leslie's stay in town. Damn the pair of them!

Well, that was life, it seemed. No trail was ever completely smooth. Everyone was bound to know a certain amount of hurt. Still and all, some of that pain wasn't necessary. He stirred restlessly in his saddle, again highly dissatisfied with himself.

It seemed to Fraser that the sun had grown a little less bright. He looked up and saw that a thin rim of haze was beginning to stain the sky. Winter was in full retreat, all right, but it still had a few shots left in its locker. A push of air coming down off the Sentinels had an antagonistic feel to it. Before morning a cold rain would probably be falling. Fraser set the dun to a faster pace.

Chapter Four

The Real Power

JERRY PINE brought the heavy stage back from Breed's Junction through a cold dusk and braked to a stop before the Timberline Hotel. Sheriff Bill Hammer was the first passenger to climb down. He was a tall, deeply browned man, taciturn of expression, with deep-set and coldly blue eyes. He turned and held up his hand to aid a slim, warmly coated figure through the fairly lofty swoop to the ground. Then he touched his hat and went around to the luggage boot to claim his valise.

A third passenger left the stage, a man of medium height, in overcoat, muffler, and dark hat. As he took the girl's arm and moved up the hotel

steps, he suddenly seemed a bigger man than his size warranted. It was in the way he carried his head and shoulders, in the ordered certainty of his every move. He paused at the hotel door to let his glance run back down the street and over the darkening outlines of the town. Then he went on in.

As gaunt Jonas Cain met the newcomer's glance across the register desk, the hotelkeeper knew a slight shock. Never had he looked into eyes as cold as these, nor met a glance which carried such authoritative impact.

"Two rooms," said the newcomer. "Adjoining ones. For my niece and myself."

"Sure," said Jonas Cain. "Seven and nine. They're front and the best in the house."

Precise writing ran across the two lines of the register. *Pardee Dane.* And then below—*Miss Sherry Dane.*

"You'll bring our luggage in," said Pardee Dane.

It wasn't a question and it wasn't a request. It was a flat statement. And there was significance in the fact that Jonas Cain, who had lived in the belief that every man could carry his own luggage, nodded and said, "Sure. Sure, Mr. Dane."

As Pardee Dane and his niece left for their rooms, Sheriff Bill Hammer came in and spoke with his quiet drawl. "Evening, Jonas."

Jonas Cain tipped his head. "Been expecting you, Bill. Mean business going on."

"Yeah," agreed Hammer briefly. "Mean." He glanced at the register. "New one on me. Pardee Dane. Never heard the name before."

"Me neither." Cain's tone was grumpy. "Sure seemed to know exactly what he wanted. Number four suit you, Bill?"

The sheriff shrugged carelessly. "Anything that's got a bed in it will do." Then he nodded, almost irrelevantly, "That girl is a raving little beauty."

The hotelkeeper grunted. "Didn't pay much attention to her. That fellow Dane seemed to fill the whole damned room. Now I got to go haul in their luggage."

At eight o'clock that night, Grat Mallory rode into town and went straight to the hotel. He still carried the strong marks of Cleve Fraser's flailing fists and Jonas Cain eyed him across the hotel bar with no particular friendliness and considerable satisfaction.

"Fraser always was able to swing a tough fist," said Cain.

Mallory flushed darkly, eyes glinting. He had taken a look at the register in passing, so was sure of his ground. "Some friends of mine have arrived in town, Cain. The Danes. I want to see them."

Jonas Cain shrugged. "Help yourself. They're your friends. For a cowpoke, you fly high. Your friends are damn critical. Remind them that this is cow country, will you? It's the alkali in the water, not age, that makes the sheets yellow. And no better table is set in the territory. If they don't like my hotel, they can leave."

Mallory went along the hall and it was the girl who answered his knock. "Grat! How are you? Uncle Pardee is expecting—" She broke off, staring up at him. "Your face? What happened—?"

Mallory looked down at her hungrily. "It's the same old face, Sherry. Been bumped around some, but that doesn't matter just now. Girl, you got no idea how good you look to me!"

He caught her by both arms, half

lifted her toward him, but did not go through with the motion when, in the room's far corner, Pardee Dane cleared his throat with some emphasis. The girl covered the moment with a light laugh.

"Same old Grat. Rough and in a hurry."

She was small and graciously made. Her hair was black and fine and held a soft, sleek sheen. Her features were delicate and almost too perfectly carved and her eyes were deep and black against an ivory skin. They were eyes that held many things, things no man could clearly read.

Mallory dropped his hands. "It's been a damned lonesome trail, Sherry."

He moved past her across the room, hand outstretched. "You arrived right on time, Mr. Dane."

Pardee Dane's handshake was perfunctory, dry. He tipped his head. "Have a chair, Grat. Sherry, do you think you could while away an hour in the parlor of this thing they call a hotel?"

The girl caught up a scarf, whisked it about her shoulders. Half laughing she said, "You're too critical, Uncle Pardee. I think it's quaint and quite fascinating." She threw Mallory another glance, then left, her small heels making a swift tapping as she went down the hall.

Pardee Dane closed the door and turned. "Well, Grat?"

"I got it, of course," answered Mallory. "Just as I told you I would. The others couldn't get together before it was all over."

Pardee Dane's eyes showed a glint of satisfaction. "Good! How high did you have to go?"

"Thirty-one thousand. And a bargain at fifty."

"Quite so." Pardee Dane carefully lit a slim perfecto. "How about the other prospects?"

"We'll have to let time develop some of them," said Mallory carefully. "Several are going to be pinched for range. They'll have to cut their herds or run up against the problem of overgrazing. And that won't make them any stronger. Cormack and Wilcoxon and Shurtleff will be the first to feel the effects."

"What's the general attitude?"

Mallory showed a thin smile. "Sore as scalded cats. We're going to be well hated."

Pardee Dane shrugged. "Used to that. Hate never won a war. Brains sit in the victor's chair. Who around here has the most of that type of weapon?"

"That's a tough one, Mr. Dane. None of them are exactly fools, not the ones who count. Let's say we caught them off balance. Now they could get together. If they do, we got a fight on our hands."

"All the more reason for us to push our advantage." Dane laid his frosty glance on Mallory. "By the look of your face, you've already seen some battle."

Mallory flushed and a glitter leaped into his eyes. "There will come another time with that fellow."

"Then he must have licked you," said Dane. "Who is he?"

"Fraser. Cleve Fraser. He got the jump on me."

"Was he in on the bidding for Bunchgrass?"

"Not directly. He did offer to back Cormack's hand for ten thousand. But by that time Cormack was already in over his head, so he turned the offer down. It was a friendship deal with Fraser more than anything else, for he's the one cattleman of size hereabouts who never has had any need of

Bunchgrass."

"Where does his range run?"

"He winters over in the big bend of Stony Creek. But his best bet is up in the high parks of the Sentinels—summer range. There is one particular chunk that is very good, so I hear. Called the Garden. The cattle he brings off there in the fall are mighty good beef."

"So he's smart," said Pardee Dane softly. "Smart, and a fighter. He sticks by his friends, which is that sort of man's great weakness. You know, Grat—this fellow Fraser may be the real answer to our problem. I've handled several deals of this sort and I've found there is always one man in the opposition who makes the big difference. He's the tough one, the hard one to corner and bring to heel. He's the keystone in the arch. When he falls, the rest crumble."

"That may be," admitted Mallory. "At the same time, Wilcoxon and Shurtleff aren't exactly soft. Cormack, well he's getting along and has a wife and daughter to think about. In the last ditch he could turn salty, but it's my guess he'll be cautious at first."

Pardee Dane's cold eyes squinted against the smoke of his perfecto, then he held the cigar away from him and tipped the ash off carefully. This man was as fastidious as a cat.

"I've got the picture fairly well in mind, but I'd like a few angles freshened up. Here." Dane produced a pad of paper and a pencil. "Try your hand at a map."

Mallory discarded a couple of attempts before coming up with something that satisfied him. "All right," he said finally. "Here is Bunchgrass. This is how Cormack's Shield and Cross runs along the western edge of it. Fraser's lower Saber range is here, west of Shield and Cross and in the bend of Stony Creek—so. His summer range works all through the Sentinels, up here. Wilcoxon's Running W and Shurtleff's Split Circle both touch the east line of Bunchgrass like this and our present headquarters is here, on the old Tanner holdings. Pete Jackson's Triangle P J and Jim Lear's Lazy L are way over here on the fringe of things and so is Vance Ogden's Square Diamond. The last three are all small stuff and don't count. Whatever real trouble we'll have will come from the outfits close in and, as you say, maybe from Fraser."

Pardee Dane studied the map for some time in silence before speaking.

"In Bunchgrass we control the heart of the lower range. But until we also control the high range, nothing is really secure. You understand, of course, that Rafter X doesn't intend being limited to Bunchgrass Basin alone. That isn't the way I work. And when we start the squeeze on these lower outfits there must be no place for them to retreat to. For if there is, then we won't be able to break them. Oh, I realize that the high parks of the Sentinels are summer range primarily and that winter conditions up there could be very rough indeed. However, tough and determined men could hang on there after a fashion and so be looking down our throats all the time. Which we can't afford."

Pardee Dane paused to touch a match to his perfecto. "It's like I first said, Grat. This fellow Fraser and his Saber holdings form the key to our whole problem. Once we control that summer range of his, along with Bunchgrass, the rest will take care of itself. So—we go after Fraser!"

Grat Mallory stirred with a slight restlessness. "How?"

"By whatever means necessary to get what we're after," answered Dane curtly. "Primarily by weight of cattle. Within the next two months there will be a good fifteen hundred to two thousand head of Rafter X cattle on Bunchgrass. If necessary, we'll bring in more. But we won't hold them all in the basin. We'll test out that summer range of Fraser's with about a thousand of them. When we start driving into the Sentinels, let's see him stop us!"

Grat Mallory was pretty much of a realist. He knew his own size, what he wanted from life, and how he proposed to get it. He knew no shred of shame over his own evaluation of himself but he owned to a queer, almost perverted pride which made him resent any other man being shrewd enough to guess his weight. That Cleve Fraser had been that shrewd the first time they met, Mallory knew, and he had hated Fraser accordingly from that moment. Now that Fraser had heaped on more coals by giving him a solid beating, man to man, the hate had become a raw flame. Yet, because he was a realist, Mallory did not let his personal feelings blind him to the hard facts.

"Fraser," he said, "won't whip easy, Mr. Dane. You might crowd his range to the last inch with Rafter X cattle, but you'd still have the man himself to reckon with. He's the sort, with all the chips down, to go right back to fundamentals, which means he'd strap on a gun and come looking for a target. He's the kind that you whip only by killing him."

Pardee Dane smiled without mirth. He purred, rather than spoke. "If necessary, that can also be arranged. I look forward to meeting the man, face to face. It should be interesting. So much for that." He looked around the plain hotel room with open distaste.

"Sherry and I are used to far more gracious surroundings than these, and I see no reason why we should deny ourselves. So we are building a new headquarters at the site of the old army post on Red Bank Creek. There are busy days ahead, Grat."

Mallory, feeling that the talk was ended, stood up to leave. Pardee Dane stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"You've done a fine job, Grat, fully up to what you did for me in Ruby Valley and on the Bidwell Plains. We'll have one drink to what has been done and another on what is to be done."

For two days and nights a cold, slanting rain whipped the range. When this storm broke, roundup chuck wagons began to roll. Cleve Fraser and his crew worked the bottoms of Stony Creek first, branding, tallying, and starting little gathers of cattle on the drift toward their home ranges. All across the country other outfits were doing the same.

It was hard, driving toil under a sky that stayed gray and bitter for several days. Another rain came up during a night and left men cursing soggy blankets and camp cooks swearing over guttering and slothful fires. But when this rain tailed off the skies cleared, the sun moved in with full, lasting force, and tempers improved.

Finished with the Stony Creek flats, Fraser and his men made a fast swing down into the desert to clean up about

Baker's Lake. Part of the distance they covered by the Mineral-Breed's Junction road and along this they met several heavy freight wagons loaded with new lumber and various other building supplies. Soddy Joens questioned one of the teamsters, then spurred up and dropped in beside Fraser.

"Headin' for the old military station on Red Bank Crick," reported Soddy. "Must be that Mallory is goin' to build a new headquarters there. He ain't wastin' no time setting up the capital of his empire."

As the outfit was about to leave the road and cut across the desert to Baker's Lake, a lone rider came jogging, heading for Mineral. It was Sheriff Bill Hammer.

"How!" he said laconically. "Rushing the season a bit, ain't you, Cleve?"

They shook hands. "All signs point to some early birds on the wing, Bill," was Fraser's significant answer. "Sort of figured to beat them to the proverbial worm. How's crime?"

Hammer shrugged. "Puzzling. Been out to take another look at the scene of the holdup. Thought I might stumble across something I'd overlooked before. The rain had washed everything out. What did you and Wilcoxon find, Cleve?"

Fraser told him all he knew, which was little enough. "They had it all figured, Bill—whoever they were."

"Would seem so," Hammer agreed. "Met our latest citizen yet?"

Fraser shook his head. "Didn't know we had one. Good or bad, this one?"

Hammer smiled faintly. "Have to wait a bit for that answer. I should have said citizens. Pardee Dane and his niece. Friends of Grat Mallory."

Fraser stirred in his saddle. "That's interesting."

"Wait'll you see the girl," said Hammer. "Knock your eye out. Dane's as cold and smooth as they come. And snooty. He's been giving Jonas Cain a bad time. Nothing about the hotel suits him and he lets Jonas know it. Lot of new lumber moving north."

"To Red Bank Creek," nodded Fraser. "Looks like a new headquarters for Rafter X. This Pardee Dane, could he be the checkbook behind Mallory, Bill?"

"He's got the look of money about him," Hammer admitted. "Well, I'll be getting along. And Cleve, should you come up with any of these early birds you speak of, no necktie parties. Let me do the wrist slapping."

Fraser smiled grimly. "Bill, there's times when a guy like you is a comfort. And other times when you're a damned nuisance. But I'll try and remember."

At Baker's Lake they found Art Wilcoxon and his crew already at work. The combined outfits had the country clean in a day and a half.

"Next stop, Cleve?" asked Wilcoxon.

"Bunchgrass. Those willow flats along Red Bank should turn up quite a few head."

"Now, I'll go you there," Wilcoxon said. "Things are happening in Bunchgrass, so they tell me. It'll be interesting to have a look."

The way north bringing them close to Mineral, Fraser and Wilcoxon sent their crews on ahead and turned into town. Fraser told Wilcoxon about Pardee Dane and both were curious for a look at the man. At the hotel Jonas Cain shook a bony head.

"Ain't here, Cleve. Mallory called for him and the girl first thing this morning. Took 'em off somewhere in a buckboard. Be all right with me if he never

brings 'em back. Oh, the girl's all right, I guess, except she's almost too damn good-lookin'. But that feller Dane!" Jonas shook his head again.

"Never had a man get under my skin so. Orders me around like I was a damn flunky and nothing about the place suits him. Abbie's ready to give him a piece of her mind, too. She set a table for him and the girl last night with the best gear she's got, and when she saw this Dane hombre wipin' his knife and fork careful with his napkin before startin' to eat, I thought she was going to have a fit. I tell you it ain't natural for a man to be so damn fussy. Sure be glad to get shut of him." The hotelkeeper sighed lugubriously.

Fraser chuckled. "Guess we've spoiled you around here, Jonas."

On their way out of town again, Wilcoxon pulled in at the High Front. "Just remembered. Dobie Roon asked me to bring him a pint. Swears that running a roundup chuck wagon and sleeping on the ground gives him the miseries. Damned thin excuse, if you ask me. But he's a good cook and if a little liquor will keep the old coot happy, why not?"

They stepped down and went in. Pipe Orr was fussing with bar chores. Vance Ogden and young Danny Cope were playing an idle hand of cards at a poker table. Wilcoxon went up to the bar and Fraser stopped by the poker table. It held a bottle and glasses and Vance's face was flushed. He looked up, met Fraser's glance briefly, nodded, and turned back to his cards.

"Lucky dogs," murmured Fraser. "Gentlemen of leisure. How do you do it in a cold, cruel world dedicated to the proposition that all men shall live by the sweat of their brows?"

Danny Cope laughed. "Could be the point of view, Cleve. Some men want more out of life than others. Some beat themselves over the head with a club and wear themselves out piling up a few extra pesos. Then they die and—what the hell?"

"Danny," jeered Vance Ogden, his voice slightly thick, "you're not ambitious. A week's whiskers on your jaw, your jeans soaked with horse sweat. That's the mark of prosperity. Didn't you know that?"

Both words and tone jarred Danny Cope. He looked up, caught the hardening glint in Fraser's eyes and stirred uncomfortably. He tried to pass this thing off lightly.

"Don't think you got the answer there, Vance. I've been pretty frowsty myself and full of horse sweat, and I ain't prosperous. But I get along, which is all that counts, I reckon."

Fraser stared down at Vance Ogden, wishing they were alone so he could have told Vance a few things. But that would have to wait. He contented himself with a purely commonplace remark.

"Art and me just came in from Baker's Lake, Vance. We turned up about a dozen head of your stuff. We cut it out and started it moving toward home range. If you get down there right away you'll be able to pick it up before it begins to scatter again."

Vance Ogden nodded, not looking up. "Plenty of time."

Fraser dropped a hand on Danny Cope's shoulder. "That riding job is still there, Danny—if you want it."

Danny said, "Thanks, Cleve. I'm still thinking about it."

Stepping into his saddle, Art Wilcoxon said, "Thought Ogden would be out riding cattle the same as the rest

of us. He's not packing his weight, Cleve."

Fraser twisted up a cigarette. "Vance has his own way of doing things," he said carefully. "He'll move out, one of these days."

Wilcoxon grunted skeptically. "Maybe. After the rest of us have done all the dirty work."

They were passing Henry Poe's store when Pio Cardenas showed in the mouth of the alley next door and called, "Señor Cleve!"

Fraser said, "Go on, Art. I'll catch up." He reined over to the alley. "What is it, Pio?"

Pio was plainly troubled and seemed hard put to find words. "I try and be a good father. My daughter means much to me and I would see her happy all her days. I wish she was not so fond of Señor Danny."

Fraser leaned forward in his saddle. "Why, my friend?"

Pio hunched his shoulders. "A man with a wife must settle down. He must work steadily. Is that not so?"

"That's right, Pio. Danny is a good boy. A mite harum-scarum just now, but he'll steady down."

Pio's glance grew very direct. "Do you really think so, *amigo?* Or do you just say that to make Pio feel better?"

Fraser drew deep on his cigarette. Pio was long-headed and didn't fool easy. The man had more on his mind than he had yet disclosed.

"Let's have all of it, Pio."

Pio spoke with careful slowness. "To have ready money in his pockets at all times a man must work. When he does not work, but still has money—well—!"

"I'm still listening," said Fraser, slightly harsh. "Go on."

Pio gave his native shrug. "You yourself said it had been a hard winter which scattered cattle badly. You said there might be some who would throw a hungry loop, Señor Cleve."

Fraser flipped his cigarette butt aside with some emphasis. "Sure of anything, Pio—or just guessing?"

"I can't help but put two and two together, *amigo,*" said Pio doggedly. "And I do not like the answer. I hope I am wrong, but a man cannot fool himself." Pio looked extremely miserable, his black eyes clouded with woe.

"I'm glad you told me this," said Fraser quietly. "A kid can be thoughtless and full of foolish hell just for the devil of it. But that doesn't necessarily mean there's a real crooked streak in him. He's just a pup, chewing up a boot out of sheer devilment. A cuff on the ear can make a big difference. We'll look into this, Pio."

Chapter Five

Cattle Trails

RAIN which had cut the frost out of the ground and a few days of steady sunshine had done its work on Bunchgrass Basin. The broad miles of Bunchgrass were now a green delight to the eye and the fresh vigor of new grass sent up a moist and vital fragrance. Viewing it, Art Wilcoxon almost groaned.

"When a man's made a damn fool of himself he hates to be reminded of it, Cleve. But I'll never run my eye across this basin again without being reminded—plenty! To think what a little common sense could have done, and then to realize what pig-headed stupidity really did, well—it sure twists the knife. The finest chunk of range on

God's green footstool and Cormack and Shurtleff and I let it get away from us! We'll pay through the nose for the rest of our lives."

The chuck wagons were well out ahead, the crews trailing with the small remuda of extra saddle broncs. Cleve Fraser, riding tall in his saddle, gave everything within eye's reach a careful survey. The green run of willow and alder thickets along Red Bank Creek was lifting ahead. Here there were riders and cattle. Well out to the right a gray scatter of buildings marked the site of the old cavalry headquarters and here was definite activity, men moving about, piles of raw lumber shining in the sunlight, while a couple of big freight outfits unloaded more of the same.

Several riders broke away from the cattle along the creek, bunched as though for a short conference, then came spurring out to meet the roundup crews, who had pulled to a halt. Fraser and Wilcoxon moved up to their men and out ahead, and waited.

It was Grat Mallory, flanked by the ever-present Chess Breshear and Loop Scarlett, backed by another half-dozen riders, who had come in from the creek. Mallory waved his men to a stop, lounged easily in his saddle. The small mockery of his smile touched his dark, smooth face.

"Going somewhere?"

Art Wilcoxon grunted. "Come down to earth, Mallory. You know damned well why we're here and where we're going."

Over where the freighters were unloading, a buckboard pulled into movement and came spinning briskly.

Mallory, still with his mocking smile, said, "Believe I outlined some rules concerning Bunchgrass a while back. You hombres forgot?"

"Other things happened that same day," came back Wilcoxon tartly. "You forgot?"

Dark blood flushed Mallory's face, but he still held to his mocking smile. "I said you had ten days to get your strays off Bunchgrass, but no more. Time limit is up."

Cleve Fraser pushed his horse a little farther ahead. "Some of our cattle are along that creek, Mallory. We're looking them over and giving them the handling they require. To hell with your time limit. We're moving in—now!"

"Hah!" called Soddy Joens. "Now that is what I call laying it on the line. We're with you, Cleve."

That approaching buckboard was coming fast. Loop Scarlett growled something to Mallory, who swung his head for a look. Watching, Fraser saw Mallory's lips tighten. Then Mallory shrugged and locked his thoughts away behind blank eyes while he waited.

The buckboard came to a stop between the two groups. Pardee Dane held the reins in gloved hands. Sherry Dane sat beside him, dark eyes curious and missing nothing.

"An argument of some sort, Grat?" asked Pardee Dane.

Mallory's hesitation was very slight. "Little question of range rights, Mr. Dane."

"*Mister* Dane!" murmured Art Wilcoxon. "Now we know where Mallory got all the cash he had in his little satchel the day of the sale, Cleve."

Pardee swung his glance to Fraser and Wilcoxon. "What is your purpose here?"

Fraser had been looking this man over carefully. Now he gave it back to him, bluntness for bluntness. "Going

to comb the creek bottoms yonder for strays."

"On what authority?"

Fraser went directly harsh. "On the authority that a man's cattle are his own, wherever he finds them. Old-fashioned custom of the range, you might say."

"And you believe some of the cattle along the creek will be yours?"

Fraser's lip curled slightly. "Imagine I'll shake up a few carrying the Saber brand."

"Saber!" said Pardee Dane. "Then you must be Fraser?"

"Correct. Cleve Fraser. Meet another fairly reputable citizen—Art Wilcoxon. And who might you be?"

There was that in Fraser's tone and manner which brought just the slightest flush to Pardee Dane's face. Here, he realized, was a man with a pride which, while not as flamboyant as his own, was just as steely and unyielding. He studied Fraser carefully for a long moment.

"I am Pardee Dane," he said finally. "I hold considerable interest in this basin. Also the authority to say who shall or shall not ride across its acres."

"Now," drawled Art Wilcoxon caustically, "we've got two emperors. Big one and little one."

The flush in Dane's face deepened and a flutter of bare anger touched the dry severity of his cheeks.

"You're a stranger," said Fraser crisply, "and therefore can't be blamed for not understanding the common courtesies of the range. Mallory should have explained such matters to you."

For the first time Fraser's glance left Pardee Dane, to rest on the girl sitting the buckboard with Dane. Her dark eyes met Fraser's scrutiny, challenged him. This, of course, was the girl Sheriff Bill Hammer had told him about. Hammer hadn't exaggerated her good looks any, thought Fraser. She certainly was a raving little beauty and Fraser felt his pulses stir. He smiled faintly, touched his hat. Then he twisted in his saddle, glanced back at the waiting crews, gave his left arm a forward wave.

Wagons and men started to move. Fraser rode straight at Grat Mallory, forcing Mallory to swing aside and give ground. Art Wilcoxon did the same with Chess Breshear while Soddy Joens, coming up fast, gave identical treatment to Loop Scarlett, saying in his lugubrious way, "Don't clutter up the trail, man."

The men behind Mallory gave way silently and the roundup crews moved through. From the seat of the Running W chuck wagon, cantankerous old Dobie Roon grinned derisively and shot a stream of tobacco juice that splashed on a front hoof of one of Pardee Dane's buckboard team.

Banked fury gave Grat Mallory's face a swollen, congested look. He glared after Fraser with eyes so blank as to seem almost unseeing. Pardee Dane had to speak twice before Mallory jerked around. Dane was sitting stiffly upright on the buckboard seat, his face graven. Sherry Dane's glance was following Fraser and Mallory did not miss that, either.

"There will be no further interference with those men now," said Dane. "I'll see you at the hotel tonight, Grat."

Mallory's voice sounded thick. "Give me the word, Mr. Dane, and I'll call Fraser's damned bluff right now."

Dane shook his head, spoke sharply. "Come back to earth, Grat. The man's not bluffing. Starting gunplay now wouldn't solve a thing. I have other

plans. The hotel—tonight!"

Sherry Dane's glance touched Grat Mallory, read the boiling venom in him, then went again to Cleve Fraser's departing back. And the almost perfect curve of her lips broke into the faintest of small musing smiles. Then Pardee Dane had shaken the reins and the buckboard scudded away, its wheels drawing narrow lines across the new grass.

The Saber and Running W crews went straight on in to Red Bank Creek and set up camp in a small meadow. It was too late in the day to start a new gather so Fraser told the men to rest and check up on their gear, while he and Wilcoxon took a look around. They rode easily along the creek, flushing cattle from the willow thickets. Both of their brands were in evidence, as were those of Alec Cormack and Dab Shurtleff. But the majority of the cattle were Rafter X.

"Mallory was damned sure of getting Bunchgrass right from the start," observed Wilcoxon disgustedly. "By the look of things he's had most of his stuff moved in here for some time."

Fraser did not answer. He had jerked high in his stirrups, staring at a two-year-old that had just barged from a thicket. He spurred in chase, shaking out his rope as he went. He footed the animal neatly, upset it. Wilcoxon moved in, had a look and swore softly.

"Square Diamond, vented to Rafter X—and recent. What the hell—?"

Fraser twisted up a cigarette. "I don't know the answer either, Art. But as long as Vance Ogden isn't here to find out about it, I'm going to. Let's see if there's any more."

Fraser went back to his saddle, slacked off the rope. The two-year-old kicked free of the loop, scrambled up, and went off at a thumping run. Within the next twenty minutes they routed out half a dozen more critters with the same original brand, now vented to Rafter X, and all of it prime young stuff.

"If Ogden's doing legitimate business with Mallory, he's sure selling off his best beef," said Wilcoxon.

Fraser pushed his horse out of the willows and set off at a lope for the old military headquarters, Wilcoxon speeding up behind him. A couple of freight outfits, finished with their unloading, were pulling out for town. Late afternoon's haze was beginning to smoke up the world. Grat Mallory was in his saddle, giving his men some last instructions about something. He swung his mount around to face Fraser and Wilcoxon. He had mastered his rage and his face had become the old smooth dark mask. But his eyes were banked.

"If this is calculated as a friendly visit, Fraser, it's time wasted."

"Pure business, Mallory," said Fraser curtly. "Art and me stirred up a full half-dozen of Vance Ogden's stuff, vented to Rafter X. Seeing that Vance isn't here I'm taking it upon myself to ask—how come?"

"Ever see a vented brand before?" Mallory's tone held its twist of mockery.

Fraser struck a hard palm on the horn of his saddle. Harshness blazed in him. "Not interested in wisecracks, Mallory. I want to know."

"Not your business as I see it," retorted Mallory.

"I'm making it so. You got the right or you haven't. Which is it?"

Mallory stirred in his saddle, threw a glance over his waiting men. There was no telling what was working in his mind. A touch of the spurs sent

Fraser's horse pushing right into Mallory's, making it shift a step or two. Here was the old pressure again. Art Wilcoxon swung deftly around to the other side, a slender man, very erect and capable under any extreme. Fraser hit hard with his words.

"Nothing will do but the truth, Mallory."

Grat Mallory studied the gray smoke in Frazer's eyes, then shrugged. "One of these days, Fraser, you're going to push that tough jaw of yours into something that'll surprise you. In the meantime, as long as you're so hot and bothered, take a look at this."

Mallory dug a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to Fraser, who read the wording on it swiftly. He read it a second time more slowly, then handed it back. He felt baffled, helpless.

His only comment was, "See that you count straight, Mallory. See that you stop at fifty." He swung his horse. "Come on, Art. Let's get out of here!"

As he rode away, Fraser's face was taut with anger and disgust. Over and over he muttered, "The fool! The damned, damned fool!"

Leslie Cormack rode down across the basin trail to town. A vigorous girl, she had never been one content to sit around a ranch house. Things at Shield and Cross had been very quiet for days, what with her father and crew away on roundup. A single rider, Nate Lyons, had been left at headquarters to keep the necessary chores done up, and an eye on things in general.

Noting the restlessness that had been piling up in her daughter, Mother Cormack had shooed Leslie out. "Go into town and spend a couple of days with Abbie Cain. You're like something caged, here. And Leslie," here the older woman's voice grew wise and gentle, "I would tell you a few things you must expect of life. The first is patience. The second is that it's the nature of men to be thoughtless at times. Not that they mean to be, but the sheer problems of earning a living in this world are bound to take up much of their thinking. A woman must learn to understand that."

Leslie had not argued the point with her mother, for she understood all this. But out in the saddle alone, she told herself a trifle fiercely that there was a great deal of difference between thoughtlessness and utter neglect. She hadn't seen Vance or heard a word from him since that day in town, the day she had ridden in with Cleve Fraser, the day of the sale of Bunchgrass, and the night of the little dinner party at the Timberline Hotel, which Vance had failed to attend.

Honest with herself at all times, Leslie catalogued the march of her feelings. At first disappointment and hurt. Then a smoldering anger, and now a bright shield of bitter pride. How much had a woman the right to demand of the man she was engaged to marry? Surely not more of his time than the realities of living legitimately allowed. Her mother was completely right in this. But certainly she had a right to more than days and days of unexplained and unreasonable neglect.

There was a queer, empty sense of forlornness in her as she thought of Vance Ogden, but there was also that barrier of pride lifting ever higher and higher. And this frightened her and she tried to hold it back and wring the strength from it. For she certainly did not want a quarrel to spring up between her and Vance.

Intent on her thoughts and with the miles sliding back steadily under the busy hoofs of her sorrel mount, Leslie was within a couple of miles of town when she met the Lockyear brothers, Trace and Nolly. They were heading up into Bunchgrass and the thin darkness of their faces jerked Leslie back to realities with a snap.

They were tall men, lank and high-shouldered, who rode always in surliness and behind a wall of reticence of their own choosing. They headquartered somewhere back in the Sentinels, traveled shadowy trails and lived, so Leslie had heard her father claim more than once, on the beef of better men. Their general reputation was as dark as their faces, though, so far, not enough had ever been solidly proven on them to put them out of circulation. And there had been a time once, on a former meeting, when Nolly, the younger of the two, had made himself offensive.

A little start of fear went through Leslie when she first saw them on the trail. Then her head came up and her eyes were straight ahead and proud as she reined aside to pass them. She felt Nolly's glance measuring her, but there was no word spoken and no attempt to block her way.

Her heart was thumping and she drew a long breath of relief when she was well past them. She was berating herself for having known any fear at all when she understood why, perhaps, the Lockyears had let her pass so easily. Coming up the trail at a jog was another rider.

Leslie had met Sheriff Bill Hammer once or twice. Now, as he swung off the trail and stopped, touching his hat, Leslie reined in and smiled at him.

"Sheriff Hammer! I'm glad to see you again."

Bill Hammer's eyes crinkled slightly. "Tough-looking pair riding up ahead. Now where would they be lining out for, do you imagine, Miss Leslie?"

"Nobody knows where the Lockyears ride, or why," Leslie told him. "They aren't seen this low down on the range very often."

"So I understand," Hammer murmured. "Wonder what brought them out of the sticks?"

Leslie shook her head. "I'm glad you picked this trail today," she declared honestly.

"Hum!" mused Bill Hammer. "Now they wouldn't forget their manners, would they?"

Leslie flushed slightly. "They did—once. At least, one of them did. That was several years ago."

"Somebody speak to them about it?"

"Yes. Cleve Fraser did. Pretty emphatically, too."

Hammer wagged his head. "Cleve would. I'll bet it was interesting?"

Leslie's eyes widened and darkened at the memory. "I was frightened half out of my wits. It was a terrible fight. Nolly Lockyear was the offender and when Cleve went after him, Trace jumped in to help his brother. Cleve whipped them both, dreadfully. They had to be carried away. But Cleve will always bear the mark of that fight. The scar on his face."

Bill Hammer wagged his head again. "A man would never mind a scar earned that way."

He would have gone on, but Leslie held him up with a question. "Any idea on who pulled that stage holdup, Sheriff? Or wouldn't you want to say?"

"If I had a single solid lead I'd be happy to yell it from the housetops," declared Hammer. "Not a thing yet,

Miss Leslie. But the case will break. They always do. I'm just really getting down to work, you might say. Tell your folks howdy for me."

Riding on, Leslie thought that behind Bill Hammer's quiet face and cold blue eyes lay a bulldog tenacity that would never give up. It was comforting to know that a man like Bill Hammer carried the law in this country.

Town was quiet. Leslie left the sorrel at Jerry Pine's livery barn and went up to the hotel. Abbie Cain was sweeping the steps and she hailed Leslie with delight.

"Child, come here while I squeeze you. I'm so full of gossip I'm like to bust. And nobody understands a woman's need for talk like another woman. Men just don't know how to listen."

Leslie laughed. "I'll listen as long as you wish, Abbie. That's what I'm here for, to get all the latest news."

"She's pretty, honey," declared Abbie, giving the steps a final swipe with her broom. "Almost as pretty as you are. But there are depths to her I can't quite figure. I'm not altogether sure they are honest depths. Yet, maybe I shouldn't say that, for in some ways she's real nice. But that uncle of hers! I declare I never saw such a man. Fair gives me the creeps, he does, he's so gray and cold. And finicky! Land sakes! You'd think my hotel was no better than a stable. I and Jonas will certainly be glad when he's out of here."

"That's all very interesting, Abbie," teased Leslie. "But I haven't the slightest idea who you're talking about."

"You will," affirmed Abbie Cain, taking her by the arm. "Come inside and meet her. Miss Sherry Dane."

Sherry Dane was curled up in an armchair in the hotel parlor, reading. She looked up as Abbie Cain and Leslie Cormack came in.

Abbie said, "Miss Dane, I'd like you to meet Leslie Cormack. You two are near an age and should get along in fine shape."

Which went to show that while Abbie Cain possessed much homely wisdom, there was a limit to it. For beauty now looked at beauty and there was an instant measuring of silken swords. It was beauty in strong contrast.

Sherry Dane, small and with almost a classical perfection about her. Meticulous in every detail of dress and manner. Contained of thought. Sleek.

And then this long-legged, vital daughter of the range, clad in a divided skirt of khaki faded from many washings and a blouse of the same material, leaving the brown column of her throat open to the winds. Sunshine in her hair, in her cheeks, and the faultless clarity of far distances in her eyes.

Leslie spoke first and simply. "This is a pleasure."

"Of course," said Sherry Dane. "Please sit down and talk with me. Mrs. Cain has been very kind to me, but—"

"I know," said Abbie Cain, hastily and entirely without rancor. "But I'm just an old woman with lots of things to do."

And so the ice was broken, but those silken swords were still unsheathed.

Saber and Running W turned up plenty of cattle along Red Bank Creek which were not Rafter X. It took a couple of days of driving work before they were satisfied to move on. They had worked from west to east and on this far border of Bunchgrass met up with Alec Cormack and his crew.

Shield and Cross had worked out the upper end of Bunchgrass, all along the timber fringes of the Sentinels. Tallies and experiences were exchanged and Alec Cormack listened with interest to Cleve Fraser's account of the slight brush Saber and Running W had had with Grat Mallory when they first moved into the basin.

"You figure then that the money part of Mallory's cattle combine is this fellow Pardee Dane?" Cormack asked.

"Must be, Alec. He took the play right out of Mallory's hands."

"And Mallory," put in Art Wilcoxon dryly, "called him 'Mister.' No question, Alec. Dane is the real owner of Bunchgrass. Mallory is just a figurehead and has been all along."

"How did this fellow Dane measure up?" queried Cormack. "I mean, how did you figure him?"

"Nothing startling until you got a good look at his eyes," said Fraser. "Then he begins to get bigger. Cold as an iceberg, and maybe as powerful. We'll see, as the weeks roll along."

Fraser considered telling Alec Cormack about the several head of Vance Ogden's cattle, vented to Rafter X, that they had run across, and of the outcome of his questioning Mallory about it. Then, on second thought, he decided not to. No sense in getting the older man worked up. That was an angle Fraser would find out all about the next time he saw Vance.

The three outfits moved east, into the Chinquapin Roughs. Here, they knew, would be one of the main chores of the roundup, for the big drift of winter-driven cattle was always this way. Here was a wilderness of broken country, of tangled and cross-running ridges, which broke the fierce fury of winter gales and blocked the drift of snow. In the twisted gulches between the ridges was the chinquapin-oak brush, shoulder-high to a mounted man, which gave browse and shelter to the harried cattle. Around the southeastern fringe of the roughs ran the stage and freight road between Mineral and Canyon City.

At Grizzly Creek, near the edge of the roughs, they found Dab Shurtleff, Pete Jackson, and Jim Lear camped with their outfits. The combined crews would start the heavy chore in the morning. Around a central campfire that night someone mentioned the winter kill. Pete Jackson spoke up harshly.

"I never kick about winter kill. That's one of the hazards of this cow business a man has to take and get along with. What lumps in my craw is live cows packin' my brand that I've worked and raised but that end up under the hungry loop of somebody else. God hates a damn cow thief, and so do I."

"On general principle, Pete—or have you been seeing things?" asked Fraser dryly.

"Both! I've seen things. So has Dab—so's Jim Lear."

"Such as—what?"

"Sign of a little bunch here, a little bunch there, driftin' away from the rest without any good reason," Jackson growled. "Hell, Cleve—cattle don't start scatterin' out of their own free will until later in the year when the grass begins to thin out. You know that."

Dab Shurtleff nodded. "Pete's right. I've seen what he has. Some people never learn, it seems. I never did like that kind of a chore, but if we don't stop it now it'll grow worse. Soon as roundup is over I'm looking into that thing, plenty!"

"And me!" rapped Jackson.

Jim Lear, the firelight picking out the foxiness of his thin face, nodded and spat. "A neck-stretchin' or two can sure be a powerful convincer. It's an old remedy, but nobody's ever come up with a better one that I know of."

"Had a talk with Bill Hammer," offered Fraser briefly. "Bill suggests we go easy with that sort of thing. He may be right."

"Bill's just talkin'," Pete Jackson said. "Not his cows being stole. That's one angle of my business I aim to handle in my own way. Any man starts rustlin' knows the penalty if he's caught. So he can't kick when he gets it."

Jim Lear's laugh was thinly brutal. "They all kick when they're on the end of a rope, Pete."

Alec Cormack stirred restlessly, eyeing Jim Lear with open distaste. "Not sure I agree with the remedy," he said curtly. "Not at all sure. There must be other ways of handling such things."

"Name them," challenged Pete Jackson. "Alec, you've been at this cattle business a long time—long enough to know that some things never do change."

"Yes and no, Pete. Maybe I'm getting old. But that sort of thing is a pretty stern responsibility for any man to take upon himself. Too much chance for a mistake."

"Can't go along with you there, Alec," said Dab Shurtleff in his heavy, blunt way. "I'd never jump at conclusions. But if and when I catch a rustler with the goods on—he swings! I'll pull no punches or play no favorites."

"That," said Pete Jackson, "is the kind of talk I like to hear. How about you, Art?"

Wilcoxon shrugged. "We'll see."

Jackson swung his glance to Fraser. "And you, Cleve?"

Fraser frowned at the fire. The flickering light made his face all hard, bold angles and muted shadows. The driving work of the past couple of weeks had leaned him down, laid a leathery toughness all through him. He spoke slowly.

"I don't like to be rustled any better than the next man. I'm not sure what I'd do if the chips were down. But one thing I know. We're talking about rabbits when there's a bear in the brush. A little rustling won't ever break any of us, but there's something else loose on this range that might—Bunchgrass Basin and the men who are in it. There's an angle to really lose sleep over."

"Now," declared Art Wilcoxon, "we're listening to wisdom. I can see where I'm going to cut my herd or run up against the hard fact of overgrazing what range I got left. If that goes for me, it goes for most of the rest of you. And when any man has to start cutting down instead of building up, he sure as hell ain't getting any stronger or more prosperous."

"Which still don't mean I have to stand for bein' rustled," persisted Jim Lear. "And while we're unloading our chests, here's something else I don't

like. Where in hell is Vance Ogden? He ain't turned in a lick of work that I know of on this roundup chore. I'm not going to bother my head about another of his damn critters that I run across. They can all drift to hell, far as I'm concerned."

Cleve Fraser swung his head. "All right, Lear. You leave 'em alone. My outfit will take care of Vance's cattle."

The whip snap in Fraser's tone was startling. Art Wilcoxon had a swift look at Fraser's face, then stretched and yawned. "Long day ahead. I'm turning in."

There were several long days ahead, cleaning up Chinquapin Roughs. Once the combined crews put the pressure on, the tangled country vomited cattle. Smoke of branding-fires stained the sky from dawn to dark. Men grew sweat-stained, bearded, and silent and the remuda broncs turned ribby and gaunt. Every other day the stage rolled along the Canyon City road, with Jerry Pine still filling in for Hoot McCall.

Mild catastrophe struck. Alec Cormack, trying to chouse a stubborn critter out of a particularly mean, brush-choked gulch, had his horse go down with him and when they pulled Cormack clear his left leg was broken between knee and ankle. They did the best they could for him and carried him out to the stage road, flagging down Jerry Pine as he came through from Canyon City.

They got Cormack into the stage, made him as comfortable as possible and then Fraser told Jerry Pine, "Hit the fewest number of chuckholes you can, Jerry, and deliver Alec to Doc Curtain, *muy pronto!* Think you can stick it without help, Alec?"

"Hell, yes!" growled Cormack through taut lips. "Damned old fool that I am. After all these years in a saddle I had to go let a horse fall on me. Don't worry about me, Cleve. Sam Tepner will take over for Shield and Cross."

Jerry Pine, gathering up his reins, said, "Things happening at Breed's Junction, Cleve."

"Yeah—what?"

"Cattle being shipped in instead of out. Whitefaces. Couple of big trainloads. I'd guess right on a thousand head. Grat Mallory's bossin' the unloading. Stay with me, Alec," he yelled down; "I'll make it as fast and easy as I can."

The stage rolled away.

Dab Shurtleff swore harshly. "All those cattle coming in on this range. What's it mean, Cleve?"

"It means the squeeze is on, Dab. The bear is coming out of the brush."

Shurtleff scowled. "The day of the Bunchgrass sale I said it shaped up that some of us could have lost our shirts. That hunch is still ridin' me."

Chapter Six

Fast Gun!

THE cattle came by within a quarter of a mile of Mineral. Twelve hundred head of them, a long, ragged ribbon of red and white, crawling up out of the desert, facing the first upward lift of country that led to Bunchgrass. Riders at point, at flank, and in the drag.

Sitting her sorrel horse a couple of hundred yards back from the drive trail, Leslie Cormack watched the stocky animals plodding past and knew a queer hollowness of feeling.

There was an ominous something about this, somehow. A monster, writhing itself into the heart of this range. The first wave of a flood that could inundate everything.

Leslie had heard her father speak somberly of what the loss of Bunchgrass could do to the fortunes of Shield and Cross, as well as to those of other established outfits near by. He had spoken of the probability of having to cut down the size of his own herd to keep it within the limits of the grass still available to him. But now here was this tide of new cattle pouring onto the range. Les was shrewd enough to understand the significance of it all. One outfit building up while others faced the stern necessity of cutting down. The signs weren't good.

Hoofs rattled up and stopped beside her. She turned her head and cried softly, "Cleve!"

He was just as he had come out of the Chinquapin Roughs. Shaggy, torn, toil-stained. Unshaven, gaunt, and grim. His face was expressionless as he watched. Leslie asked the same question of him that Dab Shurtleff had.

"What's it mean, Cleve?"

"It means that the old order of things that we've known so long is gone, Les. Beyond that—" He shrugged.

Through the space of time it took him to build and light a cigarette, Fraser watched. Then he shrugged again and turned his glance to the girl. "How's your father?"

"Cranky as sin and full of cuss words because he'll have to stay put for a few weeks. Doc Curtain said the break wasn't too severe. He even let us take Dad home. Dad sent me to town to see what the news was. When I tell him about this—" she nodded toward the flow of cattle—"it won't make him feel any better."

Fraser asked another question. "Seen Vance lately?"

He saw her lips tighten slightly and a flutter of feeling cross her cheeks. "Yes," she answered, low bitterness in her tone. "He's in town. You'll probably find him in the High Front. He's there more than he's anyplace else."

"Les," said Fraser, "Vance has wandered a little on us. We've got to bring him back into the old tight trinity."

Her slim shoulders stiffened. "If he does come back, he must do so by his own efforts. I'm not dragging my pride around at my heels any longer."

"Pride is a fine thing, Les. But too much of it at the wrong time can cause more unhappiness—"

She whipped the glove off her left hand, looked down at the ring on her finger. "What does a ring like that mean?" she cried softly. "What bargain does a man make when he puts a ring on a woman's finger? Does he think it's like putting a brand on an animal—that it marks his complete possession and that from then on he needs pay little attention to what carries it? I've never been a demanding sort, Cleve, but if cards and liquor mean more than I do—! I—I have my dreams too, you know."

He tried to remember if he had ever seen this girl cry. Now it was not openly, though a couple of tears did manage to squeeze by and trickle down her cheeks a bit before she could brush them away. He kept silence, dragging a little savagely at his cigarette. It was Leslie who broke the long pause.

"I'm sorry, Cleve. Are you heading home?"

"Later. Some things I want to do, first. If you'll wait around I'll buy your dinner and then we can ride out later

this afternoon."

She hesitated, finally nodded. "Very well."

The river of cattle was still snaking past, its voice a solid rumble, the breath of it raw and vital in the warm air. Fraser gave it a final glance, then reined back toward town, with Les Cormack beside him. By the time they reined in in front of Henry Poe's store, Les had pushed her feelings out of sight and seemed her old bright self once more.

As they ducked under the hitchrail, Sherry Dane came out of the store. She had bowed to the customs and dress of the country and done extremely well for herself at it. Her divided skirt was of tan corduroy with a silk blouse to match. Her black head was bare and sleek and in her hand she carried a white silk neckerchief, obviously newly purchased over Henry Poe's counter.

She laughed cheerfully at Leslie Cormack's startled glance. "I guess I look like I feel—all new and crinkly. But if I'm to live in this country, I may as well begin to look the part. I hope Mr. Cain will approve. He's been viewing me like I was some kind of strange, foreign insect."

"You look stunning," assured Leslie. "Cleve, meet Sherry Dane."

"I've met Mr. Fraser before," said Sherry Dane. "Though not to talk to. You left Uncle Pardee in a fine fury that day on Red Bank Creek, Mr. Fraser." She laughed again.

Fraser grinned faintly. "As I remember, things were a trifle brusque. Hope you don't hold it against me."

"Not at all," she declared. "Uncle Pardee's arguments are his own. I never take sides in them."

Watching these two, this tall, hard-jawed man, whom she had known so long and so well, towering above Sherry Dane, Leslie Cormack knew a faint stir of restlessness. For she was not blind to the faintly mocking challenge that lay in Sherry's dark eyes, nor to the fact that open appreciation of the girl's beauty showed in Fraser's glance.

It was a small, frightening moment for Leslie. Cleve—Cleve Fraser! He had always been her champion, always there with a shoulder for her to lean on, always kind and understanding. What had she given him in return? Her friendship as a companion. But it was Vance's ring she was wearing—

Leslie tried to shake herself back to realities. She had no real claim on Cleve Fraser. After all, life was life and men and women met and knew mutual attraction. But—and Les gulped slightly at this thought—she had never seen Cleve look at any other woman but herself a second time. And now—!

"Heads up, Cleve!" It was Burt Statler's voice, carrying high and urgent along the street.

Fraser came around, with a smoothness which belied the speed of the move. He rolled up on his toes as though bracing himself while his glance raked the street in swift searching. A lank figure lounged at the corner of the High Front. Trace Lockyear!

Another slid into view out of the alley next to Buckman's freight warehouse. Nolly Lockyear!

Both were armed, both were watching him. This, decided Fraser swiftly, could mean nothing or it could mean much. He spoke a trifle harshly, without turning his head.

"Les, get off the street! And take Miss Dane with you."

Les Cormack, knowing well the old feud that lay between Cleve Fraser

and the Lockyears, paled slightly, while her heart began to thump.

"Come with us, Cleve," she said tautly. "Into the store. Then they wouldn't dare—"

"No use dodging it if they mean business," cut in Fraser. "They might try it later when I wouldn't have both where I can see them. Get off the street, Les!"

She looked at him as he stood there, saddle-whipped to a fine, steely edge, his face jutting beneath the slant of his hat brim, dark with weather and whisker stubble, against which the scar on his cheek made rigid marking. The muscles of her throat seemed to twist and lock.

"Please, Les!" The words came out of Fraser almost roughly. "You tie my hands while you stay."

Sherry Dane, not fully comprehending, was staring wide-eyed. She did not resist when Les took her by the arm and steered her back toward Henry Poe's door.

Fraser stepped out into the street and walked straight in on Nolly Lockyear. Burt Statler, wishing for a weapon he did not possess, swore helplessly. Then, because he was a man of courage who believed in his friends, he left his office door and hurried over toward the High Front. He sent his voice out ahead of him, throwing it at Trace Lockyear.

"I've got no gun, Lockyear. But damned if I stand by and see the pair of you gang Fraser. Don't make a break or I go at you with my bare hands!"

Trace Lockyear dropped his right hand on his gun, made a sharp, cutting sweep with his left, as though brushing something aside. "Stay wide, Statler!" he droned. "Stay wide!"

Fraser, catching the move of Statler from the corner of his eyes, yelled harshly. "Burt, get out of there! Not your mix!"

Now it was Sheriff Bill Hammer who came out on the porch of the Timberline Hotel. In one cold-eyed glance he took in the significance of what was shaping up. He came down the street at a run. Trace Lockyear saw this and realized that things were getting badly off trail. The percentage now was all wrong. He lifted his shout in warning.

"Nolly! No play—!"

Nolly Lockyear had been watching Cleve Fraser with a fixity which let him see nothing else. It could have been that he had been waiting for his brother's shout as a signal to start this thing, that it meant Trace was set and ready to rake Fraser from the side. Again, viewing Fraser's inexorable advance, perhaps the tension had built up in Nolly until it had become a force he could not hold back. At any rate, on the first word of his brother's shout, Nolly went for his gun.

Fraser was in there with him, drawing in mid-stride and at Nolly's first flicker of movement. Fraser shot from a slightly forward-leaning stance, driving a slug low. Nolly got off a shot, uselessly, for though he had made the first move, he was behind Fraser at the finish. A smashing force had whipped his right leg from under him, spinning him and letting him down heavily and all asprawl. Then Fraser was over him, kicking the gun from his hand before he could recover.

Sheriff Bill Hammer, still running, paused only long enough to catch Trace Lockyear by the shoulder and throw him hard against the wall of the High Front. With bleak authority, Hammer grated, "Stay there!" Then

he went loping on down to where Nolly lay, surly and helpless, clutching at his crippled leg.

Bill Hammer picked up Nolly's gun, looked at Fraser.

"Either damned good shooting, or pretty ordinary," he growled. "Accident or design?"

Fraser shrugged. "I knew I could get there first, so I held for what I got. I could see no percentage in killing him."

"Tender sentiments you may some day regret," said Bill Hammer dryly. But there was a gleam of approval in his eyes to belie his words. He turned and called to Trace Lockyear. "All right! You can come down here now."

Trace Lockyear threw a single shadowed glance at Cleve Fraser before bending over his brother. It was a glance no man could have read correctly, for Trace was not altogether sure of the feeling that lay behind it, himself. One thing Trace was definitely sure of. Fraser could have killed Nolly and would have been justified in doing it. But he had not. He had shot a leg out from under Nolly and let it go at that.

Doc Curtain, old in the ways of men with guns and warned by the hard, throbbing rumble of the shots, was already picking up his satchel when Burt Statler stuck his head in at the office door. They came down the street together.

From the doorway of Henry Poe's store, Leslie Cormack had missed nothing of the encounter, nor had Sherry Dane. Watching Cleve Fraser move in on that certain shoot-out, something had come over Les Cormack. Out of nowhere it came, unbidden, an abrupt sense of understanding that crashed through all her senses like the strong, clear chime of a silver bell. It left her breathless, utterly still, her eyes growing big and dark with the stunned wonder of it.

Les saw other things. She saw some men come crowding out of the High Front. One of these was Vance Ogden. And though the other men came hurrying down the street to form a curious circle around the fallen Nolly Lockyear, Vance turned abruptly and went back into the High Front again.

Sherry Dane gave a long, fluttering sigh. Her fingers gripped Leslie's arm and she spoke in a small, tight voice. "Does—does that sort of thing take place often?"

"It probably will from now on," Les answered, coolly blunt.

"Why—from now on?"

"Ask your uncle that—ask Grat Mallory."

Sherry Dane headed for the hotel, walking faster and faster until she was almost running when she reached the Timberline. She dodged past Jonas Cain, standing in the doorway, and hurried to her room. From the window of this she looked along the street, now clearing. Men had carried Nolly Lockyear off somewhere. Cleve Fraser and Burt Statler were crossing to the latter's office. Sherry's eyes followed Fraser every step of the way and when this tall, cold-jawed man, toil-toughened and rough, straight off roundup, moved out of sight, it seemed she could still see him.

She could still see him, grimly harsh, prowling across to meet Nolly Lockyear, and she knew it was a picture she would never forget in all the run of her life.

In his office, Burt Statler dropped into his desk chair with a little sigh of

relief and lifted a thin smile to Cleve Fraser. "Man! I'm glad that's over with. It'll take the rest of the day to get the shake out of my knees."

Fraser eyed him gravely. "Owe you one for that, my friend. Warning me and moving in on Trace Lockyear with empty hands took guts."

Statler waved a limp hand. "Think nothing of it. I was scared stiff—still am. What set those Lockyears off?"

Fraser built a smoke, face sober. He shrugged. "Never has been any love lost between them and me. Maybe they been thinking on something of the sort for a long time and just had to bust loose."

"I got to wonder about it," said Statler. "May be my legal training that makes me suspect motives. Anyhow, I'm mighty glad it ended up no more serious than it did." The lawyer settled deeper in his chair. "I've been wanting this chance to talk with you about this Pardee Dane, Cleve."

Fraser perched on a corner of the desk, swung a booted foot. "What about Pardee Dane?"

"I've been checking up on the man," explained Statler. "Curious cuss—that's me. I've written some letters, and I've found out a few things. The man is powerful. He's got money and some connections that reach clear to Washington. I find that Bunchgrass isn't the first piece of government land he's bought up. There was a big chunk he acquired cheap in Ruby Valley up at the northern end of the state, and another over on the Bidwell Plains. He seems to get advance dope on the sales from Washington and is all set to grab these rich prizes before the little fellows can get organized."

"Shrewd operator," nodded Fraser briefly.

"Yeah," agreed Statler, "shrewd. The story goes deeper. The man seems to work a certain system on these deals. He gets the central chunk of government range, gets well dug in, and then starts putting the pressure on all the smaller outfits round about. One way or another he discourages them and the first thing you know he's gobbled up the entire stretch of country. That's the way he's worked it in Ruby Valley and on the Bidwell Plains. With such a scheme working well in those places it's logical to expect some of the same sort of business here. So, watch yourself, my friend."

Fraser took a final deep drag on his cigarette, then crushed out the stub in an ash tray. "Why warn me, Burt? I'm way out at the edge of things. No range of mine comes within miles of Bunchgrass. If Dane has got ideas bigger than can be held inside the limits of Bunchgrass, the men he'll be looking at are Alec Cormack, Art Wilcoxon, and Dab Shurtleff."

"Probably he is looking at them," said Statler, "and while none of them are what you'd call gentle kittens when the chips are down, the real tough man on this range is you, my friend. Oh, don't let your modesty try and argue with me; I'm an unbiased observer. Your shadow runs considerably longer than that of any of the others. You're the one who could be the core of opposition, and if I can see that, let's give Pardee Dane credit enough to be able to figure out the same answer."

Fraser smiled grimly. "I think you're full of bug juice, but for the sake of argument, if what you say is so, what would Dane do after he'd figured such an answer?"

"If he's as smart as I think he is,"

answered Statler bluntly, "he'll realize that you're the first one to put out of business. You'll be smart to govern yourself accordingly, to keep an eye on the man and translate every move he makes in terms of how that move could affect you."

Fraser slid off the desk, prowled to the door, looked along the street. There was no more dust lifting over where the newly arrived herd of white-faced cattle had passed. But from the lift of country above town, faint with distance, the voice of that herd came back as a dull echo. Into Bunchgrass the herd was going. But was that to be its final destination? Would it stop there—?

Fraser turned back, scrubbing a hand along his whiskered jaw. "So you've given me something to worry about," he growled. "We'll see. But now I've a question for you. Burt, what are we going to do about Vance Ogden? He's your friend and my friend and somehow he seems to have got off the trail on us. We got to haze him back onto it."

Statler looked at Fraser steadily. "Glad you brought that up, Cleve, because I didn't want to. Now that you have I'll say this. Vance has never been to me what he has to you, so I'll make no excuses for him. Flatly, he's been making a damn fool of himself. All winter he's hung around town, gambling like a crazy man. He's lost his shirt. Stack Portland has called his notes, closed him out."

Fraser's tone went quickly savage. "The devil you say! Then I see Stack Portland as a damn—!"

"No," cut in Statler. "You're wrong, Cleve. Stack Portland is a square, lenient, and just man. He's been more than lenient with Vance Ogden. He's carried Vance far beyond what good banking practice calls for. Put the blame exactly where it belongs, which is on Vance alone. Your long friendship for Vance inclines you to overlook a lot. Other people see him for his true worth, or lack of it, more clearly than you do."

"Granted I'm prejudiced," rapped Fraser. "Just the same, because a man's begun to slip a little is no reason—"

Statler cut in again in that same quiet, steady way. "I'm saying this for your own good, Cleve. A man can break his own heart trying to hold up a friend who hasn't the backbone to do the job himself."

"Still and all," said Fraser harshly, "he's a friend. And to me that means something. Thanks for everything, Burt. Be seeing you."

He went out, his stride purposeful, and headed directly to Stack Portland's bank. Stack saw what was in Fraser's face and held up an admonishing hand.

"Don't say it, Cleve. It wouldn't do any good. There's a limit to any man's patience and mine has long since run out with Vance Ogden. I've warned him half a dozen times to spend his time working his ranch instead of in the High Front, playing poker and lapping up booze. I've loaned him money in good faith. He's kicked that faith into the gutter. I'm done with him!"

"How much do his notes amount to?" asked Fraser bluntly. "I'll buy them from you."

"No, you won't," said the banker. "That's for your own protection. It's all settled, Cleve. I'm sending a good man out to the Square Diamond to take over for me."

Stack Portland had a head of snowy

hair, with level eyes set in a square-hewn face. This man was kindly and he was fair. But he was no fool. And once he had made up his mind to what he thought was just and right, there was no swaying him. But there was another angle and Fraser spoke of it.

"You've been here a long time, Stack. You've seen this range grow up and you know the people of it well. In this deal about Vance, maybe he's not the only one I'm thinking about."

"I know that, Cleve, and it's the same way with me. She deserves better than Vance Ogden and perhaps this is the best way of making her realize it. I'm thoroughly honest in this."

Fraser stared into nothing for a long time, then murmured, "I know that, Stack. Sorry."

Stack Portland dropped a hand on Fraser's arm. "It made me feel mighty good a little while ago, boy—to see you standing fine and untouched after the smoke had cleared. I hope it will always be that way with you."

From the bank, Fraser went over to the High Front. A few men were in there and the talk was all of his shoot-out with Nolly Lockyear. They quieted, though, when Fraser came in and walked to a far corner where Vance Ogden sat alone at a poker table, idly setting up a game of solitaire. Fraser took a chair across from Vance, leaned forward with his elbows spread on the table top.

"We're going to have a straight-from-the-shoulder talk, fella. In here or out behind the woodshed—which will it be? But we have that talk!"

Vance lifted his head, looked at Fraser, then his glance slid away. "Here is good enough for me. But for God's sake, don't try and preach. I won't stand for that."

There was roughness in Vance's tone, and a thin hostility. Fraser studied him quietly. That handsome face was changing. There was the bloat and flush of too much whisky for one thing. There were pulled, sullen lines about the mouth.

"A bargain," nodded Fraser. "No preaching, but no punches pulled, either. I understand that Stack Portland has called your notes, which you can't meet, and so is taking over your ranch. How about that?"

Vance shrugged. "Quite true. And suits me. Don't have to worry about the damned ranch any more. Anything else?"

"Yes. Working through Bunchgrass on roundup, we ran across several Square Diamond critters vented to Rafter X. I called Mallory on that and he showed me a bill of sale you'd drawn up. Damnedest thing I ever saw in my life. It allowed him to vent out fifty head of your stock. And you can bet he was picking the best of them."

"Why not? He'd be a fool to pick the poor ones. If the deal suits him and suits me, why should you worry?"

"Several angles to a thing like that," said Fraser. "First, what's to keep Mallory from going way over fifty head, as long as he's packing that stupid authorization of yours? But the bigger questions go further than that. What did you get out of the deal—cash money? Or was it to settle a poker debt?"

Vance did not speak, but he stirred slightly, so Fraser knew the answer. Bitterness roughed up his voice. "You pulled a stunt like that to pay a gambling debt! I'll bet Mallory suggested it, so he could rob you blind. Man—you need a keeper!"

Vance's head came up. "Don't try and make yourself one. I'll get along."

Looking at this man and thinking back to so many good days in the past, Fraser felt some of the toughness run out of him. He leaned across and dropped a hand on Vance's arm.

"Kid, let's quit snapping at each other. This thing can still be straightened out. Let's get together and clear the air."

Vance didn't soften a bit. Instead he drew further away. "If people would only mind their own damn business! Have I ever tried to tell you how to run your affairs? No! So get it through your head I want to be let alone. Any deal that comes between Grat Mallory and me is our own affair, nobody else's. Let it stay that way!"

Fraser leaned back, built a smoke. His face went stony. "All right. That's settled—for good. But I want an answer to one more question. When you made that fool bill of sale, had Stack Portland already called your notes?"

"I was waiting for you to get to that," said Vance harshly. "Yes—he had. To hell with Stack Portland!"

Fraser spoke almost softly, like a man merely arranging his thoughts. "The minute Stack called the notes and you couldn't meet them, ownership of every head of Square Diamond stock was transferred from you to Stack. You had no legal or moral right to sell them to Mallory under any kind of a deal."

"But I did it," mocked Vance Ogden. "So—what?"

"So you're crooked," gritted Fraser. "A damned thief. Stack was right. You kicked his faith in you into the gutter. You've kicked that of other people into the same place. If I thought it would do any good I'd drag you out of here by the scruff of the neck and whale hell out of you."

"Which you could probably do, all right," agreed Vance, still mocking. "But it wouldn't answer anything." He shuffled the cards and began another layout.

Cleve Fraser had the feeling of punching at empty air. This man across the table from him wasn't Vance Ogden, not the old Vance he had known. This man was a stranger, a slippery shadow you couldn't get hold of and nail down, no matter what kind of approach you tried. You reached for him and he wasn't there.

Fraser said not another word. He got up and walked out. Vance looked up and watched him go, marking the ruggedness of his head and shoulders. A shadow of regret formed in Vance's eyes.

"So long, old boy," he murmured to himself. "Rough on you, but I don't know of any other way to make it final. My bed and I'll lie on it. And there never was any sense in going only halfway to hell. I can see now that the slide was greased from the very first. Because I never did have what it takes, and I haven't got it now—"

Chapter Seven

The Bitter Tide

AROUND mid-afternoon young Danny Cope sauntered into the High Front, bought himself a beer and a couple of sacks of smoking, dawdling over his drink while talking a good deal of nothing with Pipe Orr. From time to time Danny swung his glance toward Vance Ogden, who still sat at his solitaire game. Fi-

nally he caught Ogden's eye and gave an almost imperceptable nod, then paid Ogden no more attention.

Some fifteen minutes later, Danny rolled a smoke and went out, sauntering, moving with the fluid ease of young, supple muscles and with a reckless mind contemplating what lay ahead with a rising thread of excitement. He left town at a jog, heading east along the Canyon City road.

Half an hour later Vance Ogden left his cards, paused at the bar for a final drink. Pipe Orr said, "Should be a game tonight."

Vance shrugged. "Not interested the way these town sports play poker. A dollar bet scares them to death. They should stick to checkers."

Vance went out and was heading for his horse when Henry Poe came angling across the street. When he wanted to, the storekeeper could be blunt. He was blunt now.

"I hear Stack Portland called your notes, Ogden."

Vance hooked a stirrup on the saddle horn, set up a trifle on the latigo. "Seems to be common knowledge. What about it?"

"Three hundred dollars," said Henry Poe. "When I loaned it to you, you said a few days. How many is a few?"

To himself, Vance said, *That's right. I'm down. Kick me in the teeth, damn you!* Aloud and shrugging: "Keep your shirt on. You'll have your money inside another week."

Vance stepped into the saddle, urged his horse to movement. Henry Poe stared after him, then turned and went back to his store, mentally writing off three hundred dollars.

Some three miles out of town the Canyon City road crossed a shallow wash in which the water had already

ceased to run. The wash angled a twisting way to the northeast and as it went along grew high-banked enough to hide a mounted man. Half a mile along this, Vance found Danny Cope waiting for him.

"Broke again?" demanded Vance grumpily.

"No," answered Danny. "But with the roundup crews heading back to their home layouts to rest up it looks like as good a time as any."

Vance considered, then nodded. "That's right. Where away?"

"Ought to be something stirring around the west edge of the Chinquapin Roughs."

"Let's go!"

They stuck to the wash for several miles, then broke out of it to the east and came down to Grizzly Creek. Here they began meeting up with cattle. They worked fast, cutting out good ones. By sundown they had thirty head in front of them, driving deep into the first timber coverts along the lower flank of the Sentinels. By the time the first stars winked through, they had the cattle bedded in a small, lonely clearing.

They toughed the night out and were on the move again in the first of dawn's gray light, pushing the cattle ever

higher and deeper into the mountains. By sunup the cattle were grazing in a fairly high meadow and Danny Cope stayed to guard them while Vance Ogden sent his horse climbing to a little benchland where the big timber thinned somewhat and a bank of quaking aspen spread its brighter green. Backed up against the aspens was a cabin and a pole corral. Smoke winnowed thinly from the cabin chimney and several horses crowded together in one corner of the corral.

Vance Ogden sent a call ahead and Trace Lockyear showed in the cabin door, a rifle across his arm. He put the rifle down and waved an arm. Vance rode in.

There were four in the cabin besides Trace Lockyear. One of these was Nolly Lockyear, blanketed on a bunk, his face drawn and peaked-looking. Of the other three, one was a short-necked, bull-shouldered man with long arms and bowed, thick legs on which he moved with a sort of rolling gait.

"High time, Ogden," he growled. "Me and Frank and Hardy were getting tired laying around. Thought we might go out and look for some ourselves. How many this trip?"

"Thirty head. Cope's holding them down in the meadow."

"What brands?"

"Running W, Split Circle, Triangle P J, and Lazy L. Saber and Shield and Cross stuff has all been pushed too far west to get at them without running the long chance."

One of the others said, "Hell with the brands. Beef's beef. We'll look at Saber stuff later on when Fraser and Mallory get to scrambling each other over the high range."

Vance Ogden looked at the speaker. "You think that will come, Hardy?"

"Come? Of course it will. Can't miss. Grat Mallory ain't the sort to stop short of whole hog. I hope it's a good tangle. We'll get our share, eh, Beede?"

Beede Helser's heavy jaw pushed out as he grinned. "We won't be picking posies. All sorts of deals to be made. Well, get outside that grub. Work to do."

Trace Lockyear poured coffee, spread hot food on plates. Beede Helser, Frank, and Hardy ate and drank, then went out to the corral and soon the thump of hoofs vanished down the trail. Vance Ogden poured a cup of coffee, sipped it, and looked down at Nolly Lockyear.

"Tough on you, Nolly—having to come clear up here with that bad leg."

Nolly stirred slightly. "I'd have ridden to hell with it rather than stay in that damned town. Cain wouldn't let them put me in his hotel and I wasn't going to lay out like a dog in Pine's hayloft."

"I can't feel too sorry for you," Vance told him bluntly. "I warned you to let well enough alone with Fraser. Hate him if you want, but you got to admit he's poison in a fight."

"There'll come another time," vowed Nolly.

"No," differed Trace Lockyear. "No, there won't. He could have killed you, Nolly—and he didn't. He just shot a leg out from under you. I ain't never going to walk up to Fraser and kiss him, but I'm remembering that he could have killed you and he didn't. So, from now on, Mallory and that boss of his, Pardee Dane, can hire somebody else to carry the torch against Fraser. You and me, we're out of it."

Nolly closed his eyes and said nothing more.

By the time Trace Lockyear had

more food cooked up, Danny Cope rode in. He dropped a bundle of rumpled currency on the table. "Helser said we did a good job of picking them, Vance."

Trace Lockyear divided the currency into three piles, counting as he went. He pocketed one of the piles, Danny and Vance taking the others.

"Nice night's profit," said Trace.

They ate in silent, hungry absorption. Finished, Danny Cope built a cigarette.

"I told Helser not to get too impatient for the next drag. We've been pushing our luck a little. Be smart to let things quiet down a bit. Besides, we got to remember that Bill Hammer is prowling constantly and he's nobody's fool."

Nolly Lockyear opened his eyes and rolled his head. "Hammer ain't worrying about cattle tracks. He's after bigger game."

"That's right," conceded Danny. "But the man's got good eyes and plenty of savvy and he bobs up at the damnedest times and places."

"I wonder if he's learned anything about that holdup?" Vance Ogden murmured.

"I wonder if anybody has?" said Trace Lockyear.

"If you had one guess, who would you tag as having pulled it, Trace?" asked Danny Cope.

Trace brooded a moment, then shook his head. "You got me there. If I had twenty guesses I doubt I'd even come close."

Lying back in Frenchy Payette's barber chair, Cleve Fraser let his eyes close under the comfort of Frenchy's deft, keen razor. Fraser was relaxed physically, but his thoughts kept running. He was recalling what Henry Poe had said one time about poker.

A little of it never hurt any man, but too much of it could tear him apart. Poe had been so right. A man's future, the respect of his friends and of those who counted, had gone to hell across the tables in the High Front. Vance Ogden's future. And what could he or anyone else do about it? And what about Leslie Cormack?

That was the angle that twisted the knife. As fine as his friendship with Vance Ogden had once been, Fraser was realist enough to know that he could push that part of it into the background and cover it with time and the future's always insistent activities. He would know regret, of course, but the world turned and life went on and a man's rugged code had a core tough enough to absorb jolts of this sort without permanently damaging effect.

But when a woman as fine as Les Cormack had staked her future and her brave dreams on a man who was turning out to be the weakest sort of stuff, then what? How deep would the wound be there, and how long-lasting?

Fraser stirred and through the lather said, "Frenchy, it can be a stinking, lousy world."

Frenchy said, "You work too hard, Cleve. Take time out to laugh and look at the sky. Big country up there, clean and full of sunshine."

Finished with his shave, Fraser went up to the Timberline, his mood still somber. Abbie Cain met him at the door.

"Land sakes, Cleve Fraser—you can scare a body half to death. Did you have to walk across that street after that worthless Nolly Lockyear?"

"A man has to cross a street every once in a while, Mrs. Cain," answered Fraser briefly. "Les Cormack around?"

"No, Cleve," said Abbie Cain carefully. "Les has gone home. She told me to tell you and ask that you please excuse her for running out on your dinner invitation."

Fraser was still for a moment, then nodded. "She had her good reasons, I guess. That isn't like Les, though."

"No, it isn't," agreed Abbie Cain. "But be generous about it, boy. Les has been taking considerable of a whipping of late."

Meeting Abbie Cain's kindly eyes, Fraser nodded. "I know. And I'd never hold anything against Les."

He went on into the dining-room and saw Sherry Dane just pulling her chair up to a table. She looked at Fraser and smiled gravely, holding his eyes while he paused beside the table.

"I wanted this chance to tell you, Mr. Fraser, how glad I am that it was you and not that—that other man who was able to walk away. I don't believe I was ever half as frightened before in all my life."

Fraser was startled. "Why, that's right nice of you, Miss Dane." Then he added, "Pretty rough thing for you to see."

She nodded soberly. "I'd heard that such things happened. But I always believed such stories exaggerated. I know better, now. Is there any good reason why we should eat alone?"

Her dark head held the silken shine of a blackbird's wing. Her beauty was as real as sunshine. Fraser pulled out the chair opposite her.

"Aside from your uncle I can't think of anyone who might object."

She laughed softly. "Uncle Pardee's control of my affairs is less than you think. We have a bargain that way. I don't interfere with his activities, nor he with mine."

Fraser sat down. "From the neck up I'm reasonably presentable. From the neck down I'm a tramp."

Her laugh held an amused lilt, this time. "A strong man's strength needs no gloss. I prefer the reality of you. I'm going to enjoy my dinner, even if I am second choice. Oh, yes—I know you expected to eat with Miss Cormack. I overheard her explaining matters to Mrs. Cain. I hope I'm an acceptable substitute."

Fraser showed her a small grin. "We'll get along, Miss Dane."

"Make that Sherry, please. I intend to call you Cleve. I hate formality. I've had so much of it all my life. I find the ways of this country and its people very refreshing."

"Except," murmured Fraser, "when a man has to cross a street?"

She shivered slightly. "Yes, with that exception. Now, tell me about yourself, Cleve."

He shrugged. "Nothing much to tell. Just a four-bit cattleman. Got a few friends and some enemies. Ordinary as an old boot."

She surveyed him critically. "I could argue with you there. Ordinary people don't thrive in a country like this. For instance, Miss Cormack. She's wonderful—the most vital person I've ever known."

Fraser nodded. "There's only one Les Cormack."

"You've known her for a long time?"

"Considerable. We more or less grew up together. The world has been a good place to live in because of Les."

Sherry Dane caught her breath slightly. "You may not realize it, Cleve, but that is the nicest compliment I ever heard spoken for anyone."

They talked of many things, eating leisurely, and Fraser forgot momen-

tarily that this girl was the niece of the man who seemed to be shaping up as the core of an influence that bade fair to tear the range apart. No man could remain unmoved by the sheer beauty of her, by her quick, tinkling laugh, her agile mind. In short, Fraser enjoyed himself.

That he did was plain to the eyes of Abbie Cain, moving busily in and out, and to herself Abbie murmured, "Careful, boy. There can be claws under the velvet. I'll wager she's made more than one man dance at the end of her string."

The meal done with, Fraser pushed back his chair. "It's been mighty pleasant, Sherry. Reclaimed a day that's had considerable gloom here and there."

Sherry gave her soft laugh. "Now I feel that Leslie Cormack hasn't all the good luck. For I've had my compliment, too. A nice one. I'll see you again, Cleve?"

He grinned. "Unless I break a leg."

As he turned toward the door of the dining-room, Fraser's grin wiped out. For Grat Mallory was standing there, dust-and-sweat-stained from the cattle drive across the desert. His smooth, dark face was impassive, but it was plain from the hard glint in his eyes that he had not missed the fact that Cleve Fraser and Sherry Dane had dined together.

Fraser gave him stare for stare and moved past him, neither speaking. Mallory went along the room to Sherry's table, took the chair Fraser had just vacated.

"You've eaten, of course," he said, unable to keep all the roughness out of his voice. "I'd hoped for this pleasure myself, Sherry. And you gave it to Fraser."

Her answer was quick, coolly curt. "First, I don't like your tone, Grat. Secondly, I've never posed as a mind reader. How was I to know you'd be in town? Finally, what gives you to believe you have any right at all to say who I should or should not dine with?"

Mallory rubbed a hand across his face. "Didn't mean it that way, Sherry. But I've been working like the devil and hoping to have a little time with you now and then. Jolted me to see you with Fraser. He's the enemy, you know."

"To you and Uncle Pardee, perhaps," she replied tersely. "But not to me. He's a big man, Grat—and he walks with long strides. I like that sort of man."

She left the table and moved away, small heels tapping crisply. Grat Mallory gave a muffled curse and stared straight ahead, eyes moiling.

In a blue long-running dusk, Sheriff Bill Hammer rode a tall and weary grulla horse into Mineral and turned in at Jerry Pine's livery barn. Hoot McCall, a little gaunt and carrying his left shoulder with some stiffness, was back on his stage route, which left Jerry Pine free to get about his own business again. Jerry took the reins of Hammer's mount and ran a hand across the animal's sweaty flank.

"Must have been journeying, Bill."

"Canyon City," said Hammer.

"How'd you find things?"

"Quiet. Good bronc, this one. Deserves a rub-down, Jerry."

At the hotel, Bill Hammer cleaned up, had supper, and then, with a cigar going, went along the street to where a light glowed in Burt Statler's office. Statler was cleaning up a little desk work and he waved Hammer to a chair.

"Be right with you in a couple of minutes, Bill. Just as soon as I make sure all the periods and commas are in the right places in this last paragraph." He grinned. "Such things count in this business, you know."

"Along with a lot of big words," murmured Hammer dryly. "Me, I never could see why you lawyers always have to clutter up some simple statement with so much jaw-breaking high and fancy language."

Statler chuckled. "Got to make it sound important, Bill."

Hammer slouched deep in his chair, letting the weariness of a long day slide out of him. The smoke of his cigar curled upward and he watched it with half-closed eyes. A quiet man, capable, shrewd and tenacious.

Statler finished with his reading, tucked the document away in his desk, leaned back. "Shoot, Bill. What's on your mind?"

Hammer dusted the ash from his cigar. "The day Bunchgrass was sold, the sale was held right in this office, wasn't it?"

"That's right. I'd met Styles. He asked me if he could conduct the sale here and I told him to help himself."

"You were here all the time, Burt? While the sale was going on and after, when Mallory paid Styles the cash?"

"Right here," nodded Statler. "In fact, I witnessed the receipt Styles gave Mallory."

"Fine! Then you saw what Mallory paid off with?"

"I did. He paid in currency, nice, new, crisp stuff. In bundles of twenties that still had the Federal Reserve wrappers on them."

A gleam quickened in Bill Hammer's eyes. "Brand-new twenty-dollar bills. Well—well!"

Statler fixed the sheriff with a sober scrutiny. "You've picked up a hot lead, Bill?"

Hammer nodded. "I think so. Yes, I think so. Burt, none of this is to go an inch past your lips!"

"You can count on that, of course." Then, after a moment of grave silence, Statler added, "I liked Jack Styles. A good, sound man. I think I could stand in at the hanging of those who killed him and come away with good appetite. Any other way I can help, just holler."

When Stack Portland opened his bank the next morning, Sheriff Bill Hammer was first to come through the door.

"Got time for a word in private, Stack?"

The banker led the way into his small private office, closed the door. "Let's have it, Bill."

From an inside pocket, Hammer brought out four crisp, new twenty-dollar bills. "Could you have these traced in any way, Stack? I mean the bank they came out of, and when?"

"Perhaps. Why?"

"Let me ask you this first," said Hammer. "Do you turn much new currency loose from this bank in twenty-dollar denomination?"

"A little. But not in any large amount lately, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean, Stack. Now, how would you go about tracing these bills?"

The banker took the four twenties, studied them a moment. "From the same series," he murmured. "This shouldn't be too hard. I can get in touch with the Federal Reserve and with some of the other banks round

about. I think I can get an answer for you, Bill. May take a week or two."

"That's all right," nodded Hammer. "You can't rush a thing of this sort—not when you have to be dead sure. I'll leave the bills with you, Stack. Take care of them. They could be important evidence."

Chapter Eight

The Ways of Men

IT WAS saddle work from dawn to dark. The trails of men and cattle crossing and recrossing. The range, as Cleve Fraser had put it, being tidied up. Brands being hazed back to their proper range after the scattering effect of the big winter drift. Long days and sunny ones, with spring heat giving promise of the summer's fierceness to come. Earth drying out and dust's amber haze lifting wherever men and cattle traveled. Soddy Joens getting his wish of sun on the back of his neck and the dust of the drag stinging his nostrils. And Soddy, as was his way, cussing it.

Cleve Fraser, moving up beside Soddy, heard and chuckled. "I can remember when you were wishing for this, Soddy."

Soddy blinked through the dust. "That's a fool man for you," he grumbled. "Never satisfied. Got one thing and he wants somethin' else. A man is God's dumbest critter. Grinds his life away for things he ain't got and don't need. Works himself to the bone to get somewhere and when he arrives wishes he was somewhere else. A beef critter is smarter. Plumb satisfied with a bellyful of grass and a drink of water come morning and evening. Hunts some shade when it's hot and some sun when it's cold. Outside of that, the hell with it. Man ain't got that much sense."

They were bringing in a little gather from the far western reaches of Stony Creek's big bend. Fraser had left this chore to the last and when this was done, he would be ready to start his herd moving into the Sentinels.

Three men came riding in from the east. Pete Jackson, Jim Lear, and Pitch Calvin, who rode for Lear. Fraser swung away from the cattle and lifted an arm in greeting.

"Gentlemen! Looking for something, or just traveling?"

Pete Jackson's growl threw a shadow over Fraser's cheerful words. "Going to start looking for something damn quick! Cow thieves, Cleve—damn stinking cow thieves. Want you to join in with us."

Fraser's eyes pinched down slightly and took on a shine of reserve. "No sign of such around here," he said tersely.

"Not around here, maybe," snapped Jim Lear in his waspish way. "But over in our country there's plenty of it. We're losing stuff all the time. And there's going to be some necks stretched!"

"Yeah?" murmured Cleve Fraser. "Whose?"

"Rustlers', of course," squalled Lear angrily. "Dammit, Fraser, this ain't no joking matter. What's wrong with you, man? Ain't you interested in stamping out this cussed thieving?"

Fraser built a casual cigarette, his glance going over these men. Jim Lear, stringy, shriveled, miserly, with a rodent's meanness in his faded eyes and a waspish cruelty in his heart. Pitch

Calvin, slow-minded, heavy-bodied, thick-hided enough to stand for the acid bite of Lear's tongue, where a more self-respecting man would long ago have told Lear off and drawn his time.

And then Pete Jackson, more of a man than either of the others, perhaps, but still one of a poor and soiled deck. Frowsy, unkempt, run over at the heels. Fraser could never remember seeing Pete Jackson when he didn't look as if he had just come in from a six-months' drive across country where soap and water and a razor had never been heard of. At close range the man stank of stale sweat.

"Long as you ask," said Fraser finally, "yes, I want to see any rustling stopped. But not by any on-the-spot necktie parties arrived at by snap judgment. Bill Hammer is riding this range now. He's the man to see about any rustling problems."

"Hah!" snorted Pete Jackson. "Hammer couldn't catch butterflies. What's he done about them stage holdups? Not a thing. All he does is chase his tail in a circle. We leave it up to him, we'll be rustled off the earth. Not me. This is one chore I handle my own way. And it could come rough!"

"Used to be a time when you seemed pretty salty about this yourself, Fraser," complained Lear. "How's it happened that you've softened down and become so righteous?"

"Why," murmured Fraser, "it could be that I've grown older and wiser. Anyhow, you got your answer."

Jim Lear stared at him, anger pulling his narrow face to a point. He rasped, "Hell with you!" and then swung his horse and spurred away, Pitch Calvin following, riding heavy in his saddle. Pete Jackson hesitated, as though to argue further, then shrugged and lifted his horse to a run.

Fraser watched them for a little way, his face showing a bleak contempt. Cattlemen they might be and, in a certain sense, neighbors. But he doubted if any of them had ever known a truly generous impulse in all the run of their lives and, as for liking them, he could not.

When Fraser dropped in behind the gather again, Soddy Joens asked, "What did them three greasy jiggers want?"

"Still whooping it up about rustler trouble. Wanted me to join in on a cow-thief hunt."

Soddy wangled a corner off a plug of tobacco, rounded the cud with pursed lips, then spat. "They would. But me, I'd hate to have to eat at one sitting all the veal meat Jim Lear and Pete Jackson have slipped their irons on when the real owner wasn't around."

"Soddy," accused Fraser, "you're a bitter man."

Soddy's lips quirked slightly. "Could be. But I figure I know which side of a card the spots are on."

The long-running shadows of sundown lay across the land by the time they got the gather pushed into the main herd which Happy Harte and Big Bob Scanlon were holding. Happy and Big Bob had a meager camp set up by a Stony Creek riffle and Soddy swung in and dismounted there. But Fraser stayed in his saddle, rubbing a hand across a whisker-stubbled jaw.

Meeting up with Pete Jackson and Jim Lear and Pitch Calvin and weighing the tenor of their talk had thrown Fraser's thoughts into a channel which led him back to a promise he had made Pio Cardenas, and about which he had

as yet done nothing. Now he spoke in sudden decision.

"Soddy, you and Happy and Bob stay along with the herd and hold it together. I'm going to headquarters, clean up a bit, and then head for town. We could use an extra hand on the drive into the hills and I'll see if I can locate one—Danny Cope, maybe."

Soddy tipped a shrewd head. "Doubt he'll care for regular work. Miracle man, that crazy kid. Seems to have found the secret of living without working." Soddy's tone was dry but brushed with meaning.

Sundown had become dusk and dusk nearing full dark when Fraser rode in at Saber. He reined up abruptly. The kitchen windows glowed yellow with light and the tang of woodsmoke was on the evening air. Over in the black shadow of the ranch house a horse shifted and whickered softly.

Fraser went swiftly from his saddle, crossed over, had a look through a window, then went to the kitchen door and pushed it open. It was Sherry Dane who gave a little exclamation and swung to face him. She gave a quick sigh of relief, a small smile touching her lips.

"Please, kind sir, don't jump at conclusions before you hear my story. I'm only going according to what I've heard."

"So? And what's that?"

"The well-known hospitality of the West. That the wayfarer never goes away hungry, even if the owner of the ranch is not around at the moment. I'm really hungry and I was just going to help myself to a small bite of this and that. Have I read the signs wrong?"

The shadowed gravity of Fraser's face broke. "Not if you see to it that there's a small bite of this and that for two hungry people. As a cook, how do you rate?"

"Not the best, not the worst. I'll try hard."

"Fly to it, then. I got a bronc to unsaddle and a session with a razor coming up. I like my coffee black."

Sherry Dane laughed softly. "You are a very understanding man, Cleve Fraser. I like your kitchen. It smells of warm living."

Half an hour later they sat down at the table. Fresh from the razor, Fraser's face was rugged, dark bronze in the lamplight. Looking across at Sherry Dane he was thinking of the several times in the past when Leslie Cormack had pulled this same surprise on him, taking over his kitchen at unexpected times and laying hot food before him when it was most welcome.

Only there was a complete and unstudied naturalness about such an event when Les managed it, while now there was something in the air that sent him retreating warily back into a shell of reticence.

Sherry eyed him narrowly. "You're really half angry with me," she accused.

He shook his head. "I'm just wondering how you happened to get way over here."

"Simple enough. I got tired of just riding around the limits of Bunchgrass Basin, so I set out to explore. I found a trail and rode it and here I was. I thought of the ride back to town with nothing to eat, so I got reckless."

"Your uncle is probably worried about now."

She shrugged lightly. "Uncle Pardee seldom worries. He's always sure. He's been staying regularly out at the new headquarters and he probably thinks

I'm patiently cooling my heels in town. There's nothing for him to worry about, is there?"

She asked this with a studied artlessness, but there was a flash of hard and worldly wisdom showing briefly in her eyes. Fraser saw this and his wariness increased, his face going masklike.

"Sheriff Bill Hammer says you're pretty enough to knock a man's eye out. There are characters in the country who never saw your kind of beauty before."

She considered this for a moment, then laughed. "You're suggesting that I shouldn't try and ride back to town in the dark?"

"Hardly," said Fraser, dryly curt. "You'll ride, and I'll be riding with you. Certainly you're not staying here."

Again she showed that look of hard wisdom. "You sound like a very proper man, Mister Fraser." There was a thread of mockery in her tone now.

"Careful fellow, that's me," he said with some harshness.

A bleak and dismal disgust had suddenly swept over him. He saw this situation with complete clarity, now. It hadn't just happened. There was a lie in this room right now and it wasn't even a good lie. He thought of Les Cormack, of her fine and wholesome naturalness, of her candid honesty and fine sweetness. Any room was a better room for Les Cormack having walked through it. But this—this was turning tawdry.

It was, he thought somberly, always a jolt to lose your respect for someone you had previously admired. And why was it that some women were like they were—while others were like they were?

Sherry Dane was watching him, suddenly aware that she had played her hand badly. She was trying to read his thoughts, but not getting all of them, not sure of them. The hardness in her eyes moved into her features, sharpening them, pinching the beauty from them. Fraser pushed back his chair, his meal unfinished.

"I'll go saddle up. We're traveling."

So now she understood everything. For the first time in her life she had met a man who saw through her completely, read her deceptive worth, saw past her carefully studied beauty. She had maneuvered this thing as cleverly as she knew how—and it was like dust on the floor. No man had ever drawn her like this big, rugged son of the saddle and, though he stood in this small room with her, he was a million miles away.

Fury at him, fury at herself, began to grind in her. She came to her feet, her glance flaying him. Anger thickened her voice slightly.

"The big man of the range. The noble fool!"

"Fool, maybe," said Fraser. "But never noble. I just don't like lies."

He moved toward the door. Still she lashed at him. "You'll be broken—pushed back into a clod's corner where you belong. Uncle Pardee—Grat Mallory—they'll—!"

He moved through the door into the night, wondering how he had ever thought there was beauty in her. He went over to the corrals to pick up a fresh bronc, but before he could catch and saddle he heard her horse explode into a run and in the starlight saw her, small in the saddle, racing along the out trail into the timber.

He leaned against the corral fence, building a smoke. He was suddenly weary and filled with a vast distaste for life. Town held no lure for him,

now. Any business he had there could wait until tomorrow. A man set up a code and lived by it until it became habit. Did it mark him as a fool or a wise man? A man might have to wait all his life for the answer to that.

The air was cool, moist with night's dewy breath. The world was very still except when, long after Fraser's cigarette had gone dead and cold in his lips, a timber wolf mourned, distant as a fading echo.

Shortly after sunup the next morning, Cleve Fraser rode up to Shield and Cross headquarters. Les Cormack, cool and straight in gingham, was stripping snowy, dew-sweetened wash from a line, piling it into a big wicker basket. Leaving his saddle, Fraser walked over to her, thinking that whatever this girl did was done with a free, unconscious grace. Her hands, brown and slim and strong, were always deft. She smiled over her shoulder at Fraser, but there was a strange and shadowed reserve in her eyes.

"Go in and see if you can calm Dad down, Cleve. He's all in a stew over this and that."

Fraser nodded, then, as she reached up for another piece of wash, started and stared fixedly. "Whoa up! Something is missing." He was looking at her left hand. Vance Ogden's ring was no longer on her finger.

"Yes," said Les evenly. "It's gone. It should never have been there. It was a mistake, right from the first."

Fraser's eye corners pinched down. "What did Vance say when you gave it back to him?"

"I didn't see him. I mailed it to him."

He looked at her gravely. "Sure you mean it, Les? A thing like this—"

"I mean it," she cut in, meeting his look squarely. "I hope you don't think me a light and flighty person, Cleve. But—!" She shrugged and looked away. "It was as if I'd just suddenly awakened. And then I was so very, very sure that it had all been a mistake. I can't explain it any better, but that's how it is."

"Tough on Vance," Fraser observed slowly. "He's been taking a lot of bumpings in the past few weeks. And maybe they've not all been entirely his fault. Maybe some of the rest of us are to blame somehow. Yeah, this is going to be rough on the old boy—rough!"

"I don't think so," differed Les quietly. "I think he'll be relieved. Now there won't be a single thing to interfere with his poker playing. We'll not mention it again, please."

Alec Cormack was propped up in bed, fussing with some tally books laid out on the covers in front of him. He grunted crustily as Fraser came in.

"Don't ask me how this cussed leg is. It hurts like billy-hell and I'm as helpless as a broken-backed old goat. But what's worrying me right now is what I'm going to do for grass. I've done some adding and subtracting and I come to only one answer, which is to cut my herd way down. Losing Bunchgrass to Mallory and his crowd is really beginning to hurt."

"I got a pretty good answer to that, Alec," said Fraser. "There's a lot of grass up in the Sentinels I don't need. Throw your surplus up there for the summer."

"I will not!" rumbled Cormack. "Been expecting you to come up with

that offer. But I'm not riding on your generosity just because I didn't have brains enough to think ahead."

"Now," drawled Fraser, "you're being stubborn as well as ornery. What's a little grass among friends?"

Cormack peered at him from under frosty brows. "You got a wide back and a strong one, boy. But you can't pack every dithering fool on it just because he's a friend. Besides, if I did take you up—not that I'm going to, understand—what would Wilcoxon and Shurtleff and Jackson and Lear think about it?"

Fraser shrugged. "Not their affair. Besides, in a pinch they can all work east. Not the best range in the world, out that way, but plenty of room. Different with you. You got Bunchgrass on one side of you and me on the other. You're like a frog in a rain pipe. You got to go up or down. Down's the desert and nothing there. Up is the Sentinels and summer range. Simple as that, Alec. So quit stewing and count on it."

From Shield and Cross Fraser went on to town where the first person he saw was Sheriff Bill Hammer, taking his ease on Henry Poe's store porch.

"Lazy hairpin," drawled Fraser. "You figure to catch anything sitting here?"

Bill Hammer showed a faint, dry smile. "Man stays in one place long enough there's no telling what might come shagging by. What's new, cowboy?"

Fraser told of his meeting with Pete Jackson and Jim Lear. "They're all in a froth to hang somebody, Bill. Maybe if you'd have a cold-turkey talk with them they'd cool off."

Bill Hammer stared along the street with narrowed eyes. "Jackson and Lear are sudden sort of jiggers. I'll talk to them."

Fraser went over to Pio Cardenas's work shop. Pio was there, stamping out a design on the skirt of a new saddle. Teresa, the girl was there, too, lithe, black-eyed, and with a flashing smile.

"Señor Cleve—look!"

She dangled a slim brown hand before him. A small diamond solitaire flashed. "Danny," she said. "Danny gave it to me."

Fraser had watched this girl grow out of tempestuous, headlong childhood into swift-maturing beauty. He was genuinely fond of her and now, though something cold and stark clicked inside him, he kept the feeling completely hidden. This child who had so suddenly become a young woman was full of an inner delight that shone out of her like warm sunlight.

"Youngster," he said, "that's great. Prettiest ring I ever saw. I'll have to congratulate Danny. Where is he?"

"He is gone on business," chattered the excited girl. "He will be back tomorrow, he said."

"Teresa," said her father, "Señor Cleve and I would talk together. You will go and help your mother with her work."

The girl danced out, singing. Pio Cardenas looked at Fraser with eyes full of stark misery.

"You see?" he said.

"I've been slow keeping a promise I made you, Pio," nodded Fraser. "But now I will get about it."

"I would be so happy for them both if there was steady work behind it," said Pio. "But—" He stared at nothing for a moment, then attacked his work a trifle fiercely.

Henry Poe was alone in his store. To

Fraser's question he nodded. "Yeah, I ordered that ring for Danny Cope. Cost the best part of two hundred. Why?"

"I'm fond of both those kids," answered Fraser carefully. "Danny will need a good job to support a wife. Think I got one lined up for him."

Fraser went out and Henry Poe stared after him. "You're a damn good man, Cleve," he murmured. "But you're not fooling me. I wondered where Danny got that much money, myself."

In the High Front, Pipe Orr shook his head. "Don't know where you'd find Danny, Cleve. Him and Ogden pulled out of here a couple of hours ago."

Fraser went out and stood looking along the street, a cold and foreboding pressure building up inside him. Sheriff Bill Hammer was no longer in sight, but Jonas Cain was lounging on his hotel porch, a gaunt shoulder point hitched against a pole support. Fraser crossed over.

"Seen Danny Cope around, Jonas?"

The hotelkeeper nodded. "Him and Ogden rode out sometime back along the Canyon City road. Cleve, I'm a contented and happy man again."

"How's that, Jonas?"

"That finicky, fussy Pardee Dane hombre and his niece are pulling out from under my roof. Going to live out at the new headquarters on Red Bank Crick. About time. I'd have wrung his cussed, complaining neck had he stuck around another week. Abbie's just as tickled as I am. Say, Hoot McCall was telling me that Pardee Dane's got another herd of whitefaces coming in. Looks like he's aiming to pour cows into Bunchgrass until they start leaking out the edges. Should that happen, what'll the rest of you fellers do?"

"Another of those bridges I haven't come to yet, Jonas."

The gaunt hotelkeeper spat. "I've a feeling somebody is going to have to cuff Mister Pardee Dane around before he turns human. You keep an eye on that feller, Cleve. Both him and his niece can stand watching, Abbie claims. She says there's considerable hussy behind that girl's pretty face, and Abbie is shrewd that way."

Fraser went back down the street to his horse and left town as though heading for home. Instead he rode a circle that brought him back into the Canyon City road a good mile east of Mineral. A glance at the road's dustiness told him all he wanted to know. The marks of two horses that had moved along it not too long before showed plainly. Well out from town those hoof marks left the road and turned up a wash and Fraser followed them.

It was a still and empty world, slow-breathing under the sun's strong beat. Sweat beaded through the horse's hide. It gathered against Fraser's hatband. But inside him that ominous cold of foreboding held.

He watched both sides of the wash and when, several miles along, he saw fresh hoof marks climb up and out, put his mount to the same trail. Over east lay the tumbled spread of Chinquapin Roughs, blurred and swimming in heat haze. There was a long crest to be crossed, after which he came down into the reaching flats beside Grizzly Creek. The sign stuck to these flats and led into the timber that finally came reaching down.

Here the hoof marks split, one set cutting to the left of a down-reaching ridge, the other set leading to the right. Fraser followed those to the left.

They wound along the ridge's west flank, crossed a gulch, climbed to another ridge top. Here a number of little terraced benches began and the timber gave way to spreads of aspen swamps, fed with water seeps. Here also were small grass meadows and here also were cattle.

And here also—was Danny Cope!

Danny was working slowly and carefully, cutting out half a dozen of the best critters in sight, bunching these and hazing them to the east. Brands were mixed, which seemed to bother Danny not at all. So Fraser, watching from the edge of the timber, knew the stark, ugly truth beyond all doubt. He rode quietly out and came up behind Danny to within thirty yards before Danny came around fast in his saddle, consternation sweeping his face. He started for his gun.

"No!" rapped Fraser. "You'd never get there, Danny. Don't be a bigger fool than you have been!"

Fraser had his gun out and Danny was looking into the steady muzzle of it. Fraser spoke again, reading the trapped desperation in this kid's eyes.

"Easy! I don't want to have to throw a slug into you!"

The first wild resolve faded from Danny's eyes and the taut lift of his shoulders went into a slump. He licked his lips, swallowed thickly and mumbled, "All right, Cleve. You got me!"

Fraser rode up, knee to knee with him. He reached out, lifted Danny's gun. Danny folded his hands on his saddle horn, tried unsuccessfully to meet Fraser's eyes, then stared at the ground. Rage broke from Fraser in a cold torrent.

"You double-damned fool of a kid! I've a notion to take a quirt and wear it out on you. How long did you think you could go on getting away with this sort of thing? A rustler—a cheap cow thief! You knew better."

Danny licked his lips again. "I wouldn't let myself think. It was easy money."

" 'Easy money'!" Fraser's lips curled. "Back in town a proud and happy girl showed me a new ring on her finger. Tickled half out of her skin and singing like a bird. 'Easy money'! Why damn you, I ought to whip you until you couldn't crawl. Teresa would be proud of that ring, wouldn't she, if she knew what you did to get the money? And those good people, her father and mother—how many hearts were you out to break, anyhow?"

Danny's head jerked up. "I'm on the square with Teresa," he blurted hoarsely. "We were to be married."

"Sweet future for her," rasped Fraser, "married to a damn rustler!"

Danny's head sagged again. "I wanted so bad to get her that ring—and then I needed a stake to get married on. You won't believe this, maybe—but I was figuring on a regular job after we were married, and a ride that was square and straight from then on—"

Fraser went still, letting this thing build up while the silence lay flat and heavy. Danny seemed to be waiting for Fraser to say something and the long silence wove a net of hopelessness about him. So finally Danny shrugged and his head came up and his lips pulled thin and tight.

"I don't deserve a damn thing, Cleve. I'll take my medicine. What is it?"

"Look at me!" ordered Fraser.

Blue eyes, Danny Cope had, and tawny hair. Blue eyes, young eyes, that held steady. Blue eyes now shadowed with a cold dread, but eyes still held steady.

"All right," gritted Fraser, "here's your medicine. You're getting out of here, riding straight to my headquarters. You'll see Soddy Joens there. Tell him I've hired you on to help us work the summer herd. And that's what you're going to do—work! I'll work you until you can't stand up. I'll haze you and I'll rough you up. And I'll break your damned neck with my two hands if you ever again so much as look at another man's cattle with any other eyes but honest ones. I'll make a man out of you or I'll kill you!"

Danny held the fierce, built-up glare of Fraser's glance with eyes that seemed to go a little blind from the pressure of feelings that churned and rioted within him. His throat worked and he jerked his head around and Fraser saw his shoulders work up and down spasmodically. It took a little time for the kid to get control of himself again and then his voice was thick and shaky.

"I'll be at Saber when you get there, Cleve."

"All right," rapped Fraser. "Here's your gun. Get going!"

Danny rode away, west. Fraser watched him out of sight and the fierceness in his eyes faded to a somber moodiness. Softly he growled, "Damnfool kid!"

Fraser turned and looked out past the eastern run of the benches. His chore wasn't done yet and there was no telling what the second part of it could lead to. It wouldn't be a reckless but scared kid like Danny Cope that he would find at the end of that other set of hoofprints. It would be a man who had once been his closest friend, a man who had somehow and for some reason gone off at a sudden tangent, leaving behind all solidity and sane balance, tossing aside all the fine things in life most men dreamed of possessing. It wasn't going to be easy, this chore, and even if a man guessed at the answer he couldn't foresee it.

Fraser stirred his horse to a faster gait, for there was a black mood growing in him. He left the benches and the aspen swamps, dropped into gulches and crossed ridges and then when he felt he was drawing close he grew high and wary in the saddle, alertness pulled to a fine, hard edge in him.

Twice he stopped and listened intently and always his glance was swinging, probing. The air was still and warm and full of the baked, resinous fragrance of pine timber. Things were very wrong here—there was something crawling up his spine, gathering at the nape of his neck. A sensory something that tied him in a knot inside. A dread. . . .

He crossed another gulch, another ridge, and halfway down the far side of it set his mount back on sliding haunches. Fraser stared at the ground and here, where there should have been one set of horse tracks, the ground was chopped with several sets. And all of them, beyond this small tangled area, led down the curve of the sloping ridge toward the flats of Grizzly Creek.

Words broke with a groaning roughness over Fraser's lips. "God! They've got him. They've got Vance—!"

His biting spurs lifted his big dun horse into a smashing run, weaving through the timber, crashing through thickets of lesser stuff, clearing a deadfall in one soaring leap. A file of cattle, working down toward the creek waters, scattered like startled quail. And the dun tore on.

Horse and rider exploded from the last timber fringe, broke into the open

of the creek flats. There was a willow thicket jutting out and beyond that a clump of towering alders. Clear of the willows and wheeling nervously back and forth was a riderless horse with dragging reins. Fraser had seen that horse before, many times, with Vance Ogden riding it.

Fraser's face went gray and old.

The pound of the dun's hoofs reached startled ears and a rider swung into the clear at the willow point. It was Pete Jackson, his gun half-raised. As he recognized Fraser his chin dropped and his gun lowered. Then Jackson seemed to catch himself, started to lift the gun again, and was slow. The speeding dun was close enough and Fraser swung a clubbing gun, savagely. Jackson ducked just far enough to save himself from a crushed skull. As it was there was plenty in the blow to knock him headlong.

Fraser cut the dun on a dime beyond the willow point. A rider loomed right in front of him. Pitch Calvin. There was no chance to dodge. The racing dun crashed full into Calvin's horse and they all went down, Fraser landing clear, but hard on his shoulder. He rolled over twice and came to his feet.

Within a yard of him Jim Lear sat his saddle, his pointed face blank and stunned with the surprise and mad fury of it all. He didn't say a word or make a move until Fraser reached for him. Then he yelled.

"Fraser! No—no! Cleve, you don't understand—! No!"

Fraser dragged him from the saddle, whirled him high in the air, and slammed him savagely to the earth. There was a shrill scream of fear in Lear's throat that broke off sharply as he crashed down. Then he lay there, moaning.

Fraser stood for a moment, rigid. This, he thought brokenly, had been easy—an outlet to the madness that convulsed him. But now—now he had turn around and look! Did he have it in him to do so?

He came around slowly, stiffening and straightening. He looked.

Something swinging on a rope from that tallest alder. Something swinging, slowly spinning—spinning—

Vance!

Fraser stumbled forward, fumbling for his pocket knife, knowing it was too late.

Chapter Nine

The Long Arm

HE HAD them in front of him, within the arc of a couched and ready gun and his bleak glance raked them and the words that came across his taut and stiffened lips were savage and merciless.

"You are three damned, dirty dogs! From this day forward whenever or wherever I meet up with you, I'll call you the same and worse. I'll kick you out of the company of decent men. I'll dare you to throw a gun and kill you if you try. I'll make you crawl. You hear me—crawl!"

Two of them were still on the ground, Pete Jackson and Jim Lear. Jackson was dazed and sick, staring up at Fraser with bleared and bloodshot eyes that were dull with hate. Fear was Jim Lear's greatest injury. His pointed face was pallid and sweating, his lips working nervously across his teeth. As long as he lived, Jim Lear

would never forget the strange terror that had engulfed him when Cleve Fraser tore him from his saddle and swung him high before smashing him down to earth.

Pitch Calvin bore no discernible injury; he had come out of the smashing collision as able as Fraser. But this man's thinking was heavy and slow, ponderous as his physical bulk. He was a stupid animal, slow to catch fire, slow to act. He had shambled around wordlessly, doing what Fraser ordered him to do. Now he moved to obey another order.

"Bring in his horse!"

Vance Ogden's horse, after wheeling and milling uncertainly beyond the willows, had come nervously in to join with Fraser's dun and the other animals. The dun had been uninjured by the driving impact, but Pitch Calvin's mount moved with a limp.

Pete Jackson was still unable to get to his feet and stay there unaided, so Fraser used a savage toe on Jim Lear. "Get up and help Calvin. Tie Vance across his saddle—and carefully!"

Pitch Calvin was unmoved by this grisly chore, a man utterly devoid of imagination. But Jim Lear was pallid and shaking all through it. Finally, it was done. Fraser had collected the guns of these three and thrown them into the dark depths of a creek pool. Now his words lashed them again.

"Get moving—get out!"

They had to help Pete Jackson to his feet, guide his stumbling steps, boost him into his saddle. But when they rode away, though the other two were silent, venom poured across Jackson's lips in unintelligible and half-formed curses.

They were gone, and the long creek flats lay empty, except for a stir of cattle here and there. Shadows were beginning to form, blue and flowing. More of the day had gone than Fraser realized. Time got away from a man under some conditions. The account of it and everything else could be lost and forgotten in a gust of wild, helpless frenzy that left a man weary beyond measure and drained dry of all measurable and definable emotion.

He picked up the reins of Vance Ogden's horse, stepped into his own saddle, and moved out.

Town in the first dusk. Yellow lights springing up beyond window and open door, the tang of woodsmoke from evening fires a bland pungency in the evening air. Life going on for some, as it always had and always would. A few might pause long enough to know a thin regret and then, with the others, would move on down the trail, forgetting.

Fraser circled the edge of town on the north, coming up to the rear of Jerry Pine's livery corral. Here he left both horses and went in search of Bill Hammer. As he reached the street there was the clack of wheels and the creak of leather thorough braces as Hoot McCall came along with his stage, filling the street with a sense of movement, the breath of sweating horseflesh and the bite of freshly stirred-up dust.

It had been a dry run in from Breed's Junction, carrying nothing but the mail, so Hoot pulled up at the stable and Henry Poe came across the short interval and caught the mail sack as Hoot tossed it down. When Poe went back to his store, the snowy head of Stack Portland shone under the light of the store's hanging lamps as he too stepped in from the outer gloom. Fraser started along the street and

recognized the lean, smooth-striding figure of Bill Hammer coming from the hotel toward the store. He sent a short hail.

"Bill! Fraser. Want to see you."

Keen in such things the sheriff recognized the flat emptiness in Fraser's tone and his stride quickened as he angled over. "What is it, Cleve?"

"This way," said Fraser. They circled the livery barn and Fraser said, "It's Vance."

Bill Hammer swore in startled sharpness. "Tell me!"

Fraser did so, his words running on in a ragged monotony. "I got there just too late. He was dead when I cut him down," he ended.

"Jackson, Lear, Calvin—what about them? Cleve you didn't—?"

"No, I didn't gun them. Maybe I should have. Maybe, when I'm able to straighten out my thinking a little better, I'll hunt them down and do it anyhow. As it was, I just roughed them around some. The slimy whelps! Who are they to take it upon themselves—?"

"But they must have caught him cold—redhanded, Cleve?"

"I guess—no, I know they did. I was trailing him myself. Just the same—"

"I know," cut in Hammer quietly. "This sort of thing is bad."

"Bill, I want you to go after those three."

"For this, all I could do would be rawhide hell out of them," said Hammer. "Dragging them into court on a count like this wouldn't get us anywhere. Popular sentiment would be on their side. Oh, I know how you feel, Cleve—but to most he would be just a rustler, caught up with. It's one of those things, boy. In time you'll come to realize it. Here's what you should do. Head for the High Front and get outside a real slug of liquor. I'll get Jerry Pine to help me with things."

"No!" said Fraser harshly. "You and me, we'll take him in."

So they carried Vance Ogden into the stable, laid him down on the thick straw of an empty stall, and covered him with his own saddle blanket. Bill Hammer took Fraser by the elbow, steered him out to the street.

"Don't leave town until you see me again, Cleve. You and I may still make a ride tonight. I'll let you know."

Bill Hammer hurried over to Henry Poe's store. Presently he and Stack Portland came out together and went up to the bank, Portland unlocking the door and leading the way inside. Fraser saw none of this, for he had gone over to the home of Pio Cardenas, where the family had just settled down to their evening meal. Maria Cardenas bustled about to set a place for Fraser, who shook his head.

"Thanks, but no, Maria," he said. "Some other time."

Fraser could feel Pio's glance holding on him almost breathlessly. Fraser forced himself to smile as he looked at the girl, Teresa.

"Your boy friend won't be around for a while, Teresa. Danny's signed on with me for the summer. I'm taking him up into the Sentinels with me. But come fall, we'll all dance at the wedding."

For a moment the girl showed dismay. Then, glancing at her ring, she smiled. "If I could see him but once more before he leaves, Señor Cleve, I will be content." Her smile became a shy laugh. "And I will wish for the fall to hurry."

The warmth of this girl's fervor touched Fraser and in some strange way drove back the gray and bitter

edge which had been consuming him. "I'll let him come in to see you before we leave," he promised.

Fraser swung his head, met Pio's eyes and drew his full reward. Pio's voice shook just a trifle as he said, "You are my true and fine friend, Señor Cleve."

Fraser went back to the street and prowled along it. The first blinding shock of this thing had passed. In all except the raw torment inside him he was the same man he had always been. A piece had been chewed out of the past and relegated to the files of memory. Things to remember, things to try to forget. He wondered if the mind was like a photographic film, holding an impression forever? The impression of Vance, on that rope, swinging and slowly spinning—?

Sheriff Bill Hammer's voice, crisp and driving, broke through the black depths of Fraser's musings. "Come on, Cleve. We ride, you and me!"

Hammer, just out of the bank, was hurrying across the street lying pale under the first stars. Fraser asked, "Ride where?"

"Vengeance is a word some people don't like," Hammer said mysteriously. "Yet the desire for it is a human thing. I promise you this—you'll not rate this ride wasted. Come on!"

Fraser got the dun and Hammer saddled up one of Jerry Pine's stable string. The way led out of town, north and east. Fraser, wondering, finally sorted out the trail. They were headed straight for Jim Lear's Lazy L headquarters.

"I thought," said Fraser, "you said it would do no good to arrest them?"

"For what you think, no," answered Bill Hammer. "For what I think, yes. This will jar you, Cleve."

In time they picked up the lights of the place, lights as meager and stingy as Jim Lear himself. A rickety layout, with not a dollar spent for anything but the bare essentials. They came in quietly, left their horses back a piece, and closed in on foot. Bill Hammer pushed open the cabin door and as he stepped in, laid his order flat and crisp.

"We'll play this hand steady!"

On a bunk in one corner Jim Lear sprawled, sucking on a thin cigarette. At the rough, bare board table, Pitch Calvin was swabbing up some tin supper dishes. He stared heavily, slow in understanding this. But Jim Lear came up sitting, his pinched and pointed features beginning to work nervously as he looked at Fraser. The terror of the afternoon was still in this man.

"We caught him cold, Hammer," shrilled Jim Lear. "He was picking out the best of a little bunch of—"

"That's past," cut in Bill Hammer. "This is something else. Calvin, ever see these before?"

Hammer took four twenty-dollar bills from a pocket, held them spread in his fingers. Pitch Calvin stared a moment, then said:

"Money? Sure, I've seen money before. Why them?"

"These exact greenbacks got away from you in a poker game one night a while back, over a table in Canyon City," Hammer said. "I heard the story of that game and I bought these bills from the man who won them. With Stack Portland helping me, I find they are part of the sum of fifty thousand dollars, drawn from the Mercantile Bank in Breed's Junction by Grat Mallory, through the medium of a certified check for that amount, signed by Pardee Dane. Cleve, watch Lear! He's beginning to squirm!"

It was true. Jim Lear had drawn himself up into a taut, crouched bundle, his look that of a trapped animal. Desperation was a hard glare in his bleached and faded eyes.

"Of that fifty thousand dollars," went on Hammer, "Grat Mallory paid thirty-one thousand for the purchase of Bunchgrass Basin. When Jack Styles, who handled the sale for the government, was on his way out to Breed's Junction by stage carrying the purchase price with him, the stage was held up by three men and Styles was murdered. Calvin, did you get a full third of that thirty-one thousand?"

"Pitch!" yelled Jim Lear, "Keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word. They don't know—"

"I know you're damned worried about something, Lear," cut in Hammer coldly. "Cleve, we're going to look this place over and tear it plank from plank if we have to. Lear, you and Calvin get over against that wall. Face it and put your hands against it—high up. Move!"

There was a reluctance with which Lear left his bunk and a final furtive smoothing movement with his hand which Fraser did not miss. As Lear and Calvin faced the wall under Bill Hammer's bleak authority, Fraser stepped up to the bunk.

"Got a hunch this might be a good place to start looking, Bill," he said.

He didn't find it among the blankets, but he did inside the end of the grass-stuffed bunk pad. Bundles of currency, crisp and new. Head twisted, watching over his shoulder, Jim Lear groaned thinly.

"Hoot McCall didn't die, did he? No, he didn't die. You can't blame me for worse than that. Pete Jackson killed Styles—"

They let Lear talk himself out. He was almost groveling at the last. Even the heavy, thick-witted Pitch Calvin stared at him with scorn and contempt.

"You'd have thought he'd found a better hiding-place for it than that, Cleve," said Hammer.

"He's a rat, isn't he?" shrugged Fraser. "And it's rat nature to haul loot into their nest."

Pitch Calvin, stolid, phlegmatic, understanding in his own way that the jig was up, showed them where he had stashed his share.

An hour later they rode up to Pete Jackson's headquarters. In their saddles, Jim Lear and Pitch Calvin were tied, ankles to cinch rings, wrists to saddle horns. There was no light in Pete Jackson's cabin.

"You watch these two, Cleve," said Bill Hammer. "I'll gather in Jackson."

"In his way, stronger stuff than these, Bill," cautioned Fraser. "He could be dangerous. Watch yourself!"

"I always watch myself," murmured Hammer dryly.

Bill Hammer went up quietly, knocked at the door. He knocked three times before he got a hard and muffled answer.

"Name yourself!"

"Bill Hammer, Jackson. I want you!"

"Not for helping string a damn rustler. You can't hold me for that, Hammer."

"We'll see. Coming in, Jackson!"

Bill Hammer drew his gun and kicked the door open.

Jackson cursed harshly. "You don't have to knock the place down. All this fuss over a stinking rustler. Wait'll I get a light going."

A match flared weakly, touched a lamp wick, and thin yellow glow took over the cabin. Pete Jackson was in

his underwear, just out of his blankets. He had a crude bandage on his head and the cabin smelled of whisky. He stood with his left side toward the door and his right hand was hidden.

Stepping full into the doorway, Bill Hammer said, "Jackson, I want you for the murder of Jack Styles— You fool—don't try it!"

But Pete Jackson did try it. That hidden right hand snaked into view and there was the blue of gun steel in it.

Sheriff Bill Hammer shot twice, from the hip. Pete Jackson shot once, as he was falling, driving a gouge of splinters from the floor.

"No, Cleve, Les isn't here. She's off riding somewhere. I declare, I never saw that girl so restless as she's been lately. She just can't stay around the house any more. Come in, boy. Breakfast's over hours ago, but I'll have some coffee ready in a jiffy."

Sarah Cormack was a vigorous, upstanding woman, active and energetic despite the silver that was beginning to brush her hair. Kindliness lay in her, and a love for her family and her ranch-house home that came out of her in a warming glow.

Cleve Fraser spun his hat in his hands and tried to find the right words. "I'm glad Les isn't here, Mother Cormack. I was afraid she would be, and I'd rather she'd hear it from you than from me. You'll understand how to say it better."

He saw the swift anxiety leap into Sarah Cormack's eyes. "Boy, there's a look about you. You're weary, and there's something in your eyes—"

"Alec will have to know, too," said Fraser. "I'll tell you both."

Sarah Cormack led the way into her husband's room. Alec Cormack stirred restlessly in his bed and sent up his barking growl.

"Cleve, what's this about another herd of whitefaces coming in? That damn Pardee Dane must be figuring—"

"Hush, Alec!" cut in Sarah Cormack. "Cleve has something else to tell us."

From beneath jutting, frosty brows, Alec Cormack peered at Cleve. Then he said, with keen intuition, "It's Ogden—Vance Ogden?"

Slowly Fraser nodded. "That's right, Alec. He's gone."

Sarah Cormack gave a soft little cry and her hands came together, twisting. A trifle heavily, Alec Cormack said, "Dead?"

"Yes. Pete Jackson, Jim Lear, and that rider of Lear's, Pitch Calvin—they caught him rustling. They—lynched him."

Sarah Cormack whirled and hurried from the room. Alec Cormack plucked at the bed covers with aimless fingers, while a fierceness built up in his eyes. His voice came out in a low, hard rasp.

"The damned, vicious whelps! For that they should be run out of the country. When I'm able to be up and around again I'll take a stand for that. Cleve, he was—rustling?"

"Yes, Alec."

"They still had no right. I'll make them bleed. I'll see to it that they—"

"No need, Alec. That's already happened."

"How? You mean that you—?"

"I was there. Bill Hammer handled things. He got his three men who held up the stage and killed Jack Styles. Jackson's dead—he tried to make a

fight of it. Lear and Calvin go out to Breed's Junction to stand trial. With the law reading as it does for that sort of crime, neither of them will ever be back. I guess you could say that things are pretty well evened for Vance."

"So!" growled Cormack. "They were the three! That isn't at all as I figured it would be. Yet, now that you tell me this, it's so damn logical. They were there, at the sale. They knew the amount of money paid. They knew Styles would be taking it out on the stage with him. And as I recall, Jackson and Lear didn't stay around town long after the sale was over. Went off together, on some excuse or other. The mangy crooks! Whining about losing a few cows, yet all the time—a-argh!" Cormack swung a clenched fist in a short gesture.

There was silence, while the fierceness died out in the old cattleman. Then, with brooding heaviness, he asked, "How could a man go all to pieces so suddenly?"

"Something I've been trying to figure out, Alec," Fraser answered wearily.

"Looking back across the years," said Cormack slowly, "I can recall a couple of others who went the same way. They stood up to life just so long. Then, suddenly, it seemed to whip them and they let go all holds and began to slide. Looks like Vance was one of such, Cleve!"

"I guess that's as good an answer as any, Alec." Fraser shrugged and moved to the door. "I'll be watching Pardee Dane and his herds and I'll let you know."

Sarah Cormack stood at a window near the ranch-house door. She was staring at nothing, dabbing her eyes occasionally with her apron. Fraser stood beside her awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

"If it only could have been in any other way, boy," she said in muffled tones.

He would be thirty on his next birthday, but Mother Cormack always called him "boy." She always would.

He touched her shoulder briefly and went out.

Things were active at Saber headquarters. In front of the saddle shed, Happy Harte was sorting and checking over sawbuck pack saddles, ropes, tarps, and other pack gear. Happy was whistling contentedly. He had a trick of putting out a fluting, birdlike warble and it was a pleasant, cheerful sound.

In one of the corrals, Big Bob Scanlon was cold-shoeing several of the cavvy broncs and Danny Cope was there, helping him. Soddy Joens was stacking grub items on the narrow porch of the ranch house and came sauntering over as Cleve Fraser rode up. Soddy jerked his head toward Danny Cope.

"Made up your mind kinda sudden there, didn't you?"

"Figured we could use an extra man," said Fraser briefly. "The kid's got the makings of a good hand."

"Um!" grunted Soddy enigmatically. He looked at Fraser keenly. "What knothole did you get dragged through?"

While he unsaddled, Fraser gave Soddy the whole story, tersely blunt. Soddy blinked.

"Didn't I tell you, Cleve, that Jackson and Lear and Calvin had coyote sign all over them? Well, Bill Hammer is one long, shrewd arm of the law, for my money." Soddy considered for a moment, then twitched his head again

toward Danny Cope. "When the story gets around there may be some who'll ask questions about him."

"He's riding for and with us," answered Fraser. "If they say too much, kick their teeth in."

Again Soddy blinked. "Just so, Cleve."

Knowing that Soddy would see to it that the others got the word, Fraser went into the ranch house, pulled off his boots, and stretched out on his bunk. Here it was warmly still. Through the open window the resin-scented air poured with steady comfort. He hadn't slept a wink the night before. But now, for some reason, he was easier inside, more relaxed. Maybe, in telling of Vance to others, he had lightened the load on himself. Which was a queer way to feel about it, but it could be so. He was pondering this theory when sleep took him.

The day had just about run out when he awakened. He shaved, had a wash, and went out, the lines in his face softened somewhat and much of the old spring back in his muscles. Danny Cope was over at the corrals, brushing down his horse. Every move Danny made was mechanical.

Fraser hooked his arms on the corral fence. Danny looked at him, stark misery in his blue eyes.

"You should have let them have me, too. If Vance deserved it, so did I."

"Wouldn't have happened to Vance if I could have got there in time. Kid, that's a closed book. Never open it again. Care to say where you and Vance were heading with those cows?"

Slowly Danny shook his head. "That would make me lower than I am. Which is a poor answer to give you, Cleve, after the break you've given me. But that's the way it will have to be."

Fraser nodded. "Had to ask. But I'd have thought the less of you if you'd told. Saw Teresa in town. She's happy over your new job and willing to wait until fall to get married, providing she can see you once more before you head into the hills with me. So you might as well head for town. Don't be too late getting back. Busy days ahead."

Danny slugged his startled bronc in the ribs with a clenched fist—not too hard. "Vance got the rope," he choked. "I get this. The world's crazy!"

But half an hour later when Danny rode down the town trail he was high and eager in his saddle. Watching him go, Fraser smiled grimly. "Come fall, kid," he murmured, "you'll be all right."

The outfit was just sitting down to supper when Art Wilcoxon and Dab Shurtleff rode in. Talk was idle and of little moment until the meal was done and Fraser led the way over to the ranch house through the serene blue dusk.

"Just right out here," said Art Wilcoxon, hunkering down on the porch edge. "Get it off your chest, Dab."

"After what's happened," said Shurtleff in his blunt and heavy way, "a man gets to wondering just who's crooked and who's straight in this damned world. The Jackson, Lear, and Calvin part don't surprise me too much somehow. But the rest puts me back on my heels. Art and me been wondering if Ogden was long-riding alone. Him and young Cope were together a lot around town."

"Danny Cope," said Fraser clearly, "is my man. Drawing wages from me and chousing my cattle. He heads into the hills tomorrow with Saber."

"Recent thing, ain't it, his signing on with you?"

"Maybe, but still a fact."

Neither Wilcoxon or Shurtleff missed the significant inflection in Fraser's tone. Wilcoxon said mildly, "Guess that answers it."

Dab Shurtleff, not quite so readily or willingly, finally nodded. "Yeah," he growled, "guess it does. We'll consider that page turned. But what about Pardee Dane and all the cattle he's bringing in? Maybe you got an answer to that, too, Fraser?"

"I was halfway figuring on riding over tonight and asking Dane about it," said Fraser. "He's the one who should know. What do you fellows think?"

"Right with you," said Art Wilcoxon, getting to his feet. "High time we quit guessing and got at some facts."

Chapter Ten

Gathering Storm

IN A headquarter's office that smelled of new lumber and newer paint, Pardee Dane sat at ease, a freshly lighted perfecto drawing free and fragrant between his lips. Across the desk from him was Grat Mallory, stained with the marks of hard riding.

In a chair in a corner Sherry Dane was curled, feet tucked beneath her, examining her faultlessly kept finger nails with brooding preoccupation. Somehow she looked older than usual, and a little weary. In her dark eyes was a strange uncertainty, as though life had held certain values which she had never considered before and now, suddenly recognizing them, and seeing them as desirable, found them tantalizingly beyond her reach.

Grat Mallory, after watching her guardedly for a moment, turned to Pardee Dane. "We've cut the herd for a thousand head of the sturdiest. They're ready to go. Still want to go through with it?"

"Of course," said Pardee Dane crisply. "There's no sounder course than our original strategy. Once we get control of the Garden and the other high meadows of the Sentinels, we can begin to spread our elbows in any direction we desire. There's no place for the opposition to go but out. By fall we should have things pretty well sewed up. Not having any qualms, are you, Grat?"

Mallory shrugged. "Just wanted to be sure that you realize what is sure to come. One hell of a fight. Fraser's no fool, and he's tough. The others, Cormack, Wilcoxon, and Shurtleff—they'll back his hand because there's nothing else they can do."

"I see no reason to expect any more trouble than we had in Ruby Valley, for instance," said Dane. "I recall plenty of bluff and bluster thrown our way there, but when the chips were on the table the blusterers backed down."

"Sure they did—there," nodded Mallory. "But here things are different. The outfits we had to buck in Ruby Valley and on Bidwell Plains too, for that matter, had nothing left to put up a fight about, once we bought the government grass from under them. You might say most of them were transients, staying on for government grass alone. We'd bought that, all legal and according to Hoyle. The law stood behind our claim. Realizing that, the other outfits moved out peaceably enough."

"A comparable situation exists right

here," said Dane.

"No, it doesn't," differed Mallory. "The main outfits here are dug in, have been here a long time on range that is really theirs. Even after losing out on Bunchgrass they can, by cutting down their herds some, still get by. They won't scare easy or bluff easy. They'll fight. And if they pool their strength, they can make it plenty tough."

"Grat," accused Pardee Dane sarcastically, "I believe you're losing your nerve."

Mallory flushed and his eyes began to moil. "Once and for all, Mr. Dane—let's drop that kind of talk. I've never let you down yet and I'm not going to start now."

Their eyes locked and it was Pardee Dane who looked away. "Consider it unsaid, Grat."

"Fair enough," said Mallory. "We'll go ahead with the plan as you wish. But you better get used to gunsmoke, for you're going to smell it. One thing, we won't have Bill Hammer in our hair. He's going out to Breed's Junction with Lear and Calvin. There was an angle that sure fooled me—those who pulled the stage holdup, I mean."

Pardee Dane smiled cynically. "That affair confirms my belief that there are few thoroughly honest people."

Outside, spur chains tinkled and a knock sounded at the office's outer door.

"See who it is and what they want," said Pardee Dane.

Mallory opened the door. It was Chess Breshear and he said, "Visitors. Fraser, Wilcoxon, and Shurtleff. Shall I have the boys let them in?"

"What do they want?" Mallory asked.

Breshear jerked a nod toward Pardee Dane. "Say they want to have a talk with him."

Pardee Dane said, "Send them in."

Sherry Dane slipped from her chair and left the office quietly by an inner door.

Pardee Dane looked at Grat Mallory triumphantly. "When they begin coming to us, it means their nerve is running out."

"Maybe," said Mallory dryly. "But I wouldn't count on it."

Fraser was the first to enter, then Dab Shurtleff, with Art Wilcoxon in the rear. Wilcoxon closed the door, stood with his back to it. Pardee Dane settled down behind his desk, looked at them.

"Sorry I haven't enough chairs in here for all. But perhaps your business with me won't take long. I hope not, for I'm very busy getting—"

"Stow that!" said Dab Shurtleff bluntly. He looked Pardee Dane up and down. "Our business will take as long as it takes. And you'll listen."

Pardee Dane's hands pressed white on the desk top and his cold eyes glinted in the lamplight. He wasn't used to being spoken to in this manner.

"Careful!" he warned. "I can call my men and—"

"And I can gut-shoot you and watch you kick before they ever get here," cut in Shurtleff, rough and harsh as always. "Come down off your high perch. If you figure you're wearing a crown it's all in your imagination. You got all the earmarks of a damn crook to me. And I never use soft words on a crook."

Fraser saw the bleak fury build up in Pardee Dane's face, sending little muscular quivers across his precise features. Dane's lower features seemed to cave in as his lips grew almost invisible under pressure.

"Have your say," he choked, "and then get out!"

"It's about cattle," said Fraser. "You're bringing in more than Bunchgrass can handle for any length of time. Question is, do you intend to ruin a great piece of range by overgrazing, or do you figure to let some of the cattle spill over the borders of Bunchgrass? The first is your business, for you own Bunchgrass. But the second possibility is our business. So, we want to know."

"That's right," seconded Shurtleff, "we want to know."

"My plans and my affairs are my own," gritted Dane. "Does that answer you?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, yes," said Fraser. "But these are very strange circumstances. You'll have to say more."

Pardee Dane's glance ran over the three of them. "I discuss my plans only with whom I choose. I do not choose to do so with you. You can leave the same way you came."

Dab Shurtleff began to growl, but Fraser stopped him with a hand on his arm. "We're not so coy about our plans, Dane. Frankly, we don't trust you. We think your ambitions are outsize. We feel that you've got this thing figured as another Ruby Valley or Bidwell Plains affair. We suggest you change your mind. Trouble ahead if you don't."

"You can't stand in my own ranch house and threaten me," rapped Dane. He had got a grip on himself again and the old, cold mask had taken over. "I don't scare."

"Not trying to threaten, not trying to scare," said Fraser. "Just telling you, that's all. You'll get what you ask for." With that, Fraser turned and looked at Grat Mallory. "This is for you, personally."

Grat Mallory was playing the part of a slightly bored listener to it all. But the pinched, hard shine in his black eyes told of his inner alertness.

"All that Mr. Dane says, goes for me too, Fraser."

"This," said Fraser harshly, "is something else. Yesterday a man who'd been my good and long-time friend was lynched as a rustler. I won't try and analyze the breakup inside him that made him slip as far as he did. But this I know. It started after he came to know and play poker with you. He went down the slide himself, but you greased it for him. He touched you and went bad, Mallory."

Mallory shrugged. "Ogden knew what he was doing. He was over twenty-one. He must have liked it that way. Why should you kick?"

"Because," rapped Fraser, "I don't think Vance would have ended as he did if you hadn't given him a damn big push in that direction. Yes, Mallory—he touched you and went bad. I'm never going to forget that. I don't believe this range will ever be big enough to hold you and me at the same time."

Mallory's smooth, dark face tightened and his glance flickered around before coming back to Fraser. "A stacked deck," he said evenly. "I don't bite."

"This is an extra thought and all Fraser's," growled Dab Shurtleff. "Ogden was his friend, Mallory—not mine. So don't let me and Wilcoxon hold you back."

"A stacked deck," said Mallory again.

Art Wilcoxon said, "We could stay here all night and end up the same place."

Fraser nodded and moved to the

door. "Come on!"

They went out, he and Wilcoxon and Shurtleff. They went swiftly to their horses, swung up. Round about them in the dark were men, Chess Breshear, Loop Scarlett, and others. Fraser knew they were there, though he could not see them. But there was no hostile move. When they had put a couple of hundred yards between them and the headquarters, Art Wilcoxon let out a long breath.

"If Mallory or Dane had opened that door and hollered, things could have turned interesting, Cleve."

"Maybe. But they're not worked up to that point yet."

"Kind of pushing the personal angle with Mallory, weren't you?" growled Shurtleff. "What was the idea?"

"You heard what I said," was Fraser's brief reply. "That was the idea."

Shurtleff grunted. "Hard enough trying to prop up a live man. No point in doing the same for a dead one—no point at all."

Fraser did not answer. Dab Shurtleff had his good points, but he was a man whose life was guided by a hard, unimaginative practicality. He could never understand how it was about Vance.

"Well, anyhow, I think we made our point clear," said Wilcoxon. "Dane knows what the future holds if he gets out of bounds."

Back in the Rafter X office, Pardee Dane was pacing his anger off, up and down, up and down. "The damned nerve of them!" he exploded. "Trying to threaten me in my own bailiwick. They'll get their answer. Fraser goes first and then that damned, rough-tongued slug of a Shurtleff!"

Grat Mallory's eyes held a sardonic glint. "Still think it's going to be as simple as Ruby Valley or Bidwell Plains?"

The inner door opened and Sherry Dane stepped through. No man could have correctly read the thoughts which lay behind the still brooding of Sherry's eyes, for her thoughts and emotions were so jumbled she could not fully understand them herself. She spoke simply.

"I listened. I think you would be smart, Uncle Pardee, to be satisfied with what you have."

Pardee Dane swung on her testily. "Good God, girl, don't tell me that you too see things about this fellow Fraser that I can't—that he's too big to touch?"

Sherry shrugged. "It could be a woman's intuition at work."

"My dear," said Pardee Dane, with some acidness, "suppose you tend to your own small affairs and let me manage the bigger ones." He whirled on Grat Mallory. "We put that herd into the Sentinels, into this Garden spot that Fraser's so proud of. That's final and settled!"

If Leslie Cormack had been restless before, she was doubly so now. She didn't want to go to town, for she knew people would look at her and be wondering about her thoughts concerning Vance Ogden. And she couldn't stay in the house. She had to ride and ride, and she did just that, going no place in particular, just so she was out and moving, somewhere.

She had given up trying to analyze her feelings over the news of Vance Ogden's death. When her mother had put comforting arms about her and given her the story, Leslie's first reaction had been a sort of shocked numbness. The cruel ignominity of such an end had left her stunned and sickened.

She had wept some, but more because of tarnished memories than from any dire sense of loss. And this had puzzled her and made her angry at herself. It offended her sense of propriety that something which had once been so great in her life should have so suddenly become of lesser moment. Was she shallow, callous? Just what sort of a person was she, anyhow?

How, she wondered, was Cleve Fraser taking it? She knew his deep, headlong faithfulness toward his friends; she knew how much he had thought of Vance. Suddenly she wanted to see Fraser above all else, see him and talk to him and perhaps win from him an answer concerning her own questions about herself. Back across the years Cleve had, somehow, always understood.

She had ridden as far as Stony Creek and had crossed it before she realized that as far as she could see across Saber's big-bend winter range there was not a single cow critter in sight. Which meant only one thing. The Saber herd had already started up into the Sentinels, on its way to summer range. And that meant she would find no one at Saber headquarters. But she went on just the same and then sat her saddle in grave silence as she looked around the still and deserted headquarters.

She knew a swift surge of regret because Fraser had headed into the hills without a good-by to her; it was the first time this had ever happened. But just as swiftly she understood why he had not. It would have been impossible for them to meet and talk without the shadow of Vance standing before them, and that was something which would have hurt both of them until time had softened matters and given more comforting philosophy a chance to take form.

Les was musing on this when she heard the tap of approaching hoofs. She turned and went still in her saddle. It was Sherry Dane riding in.

For a moment Les knew a stir of almost anger; it was as though this girl from the outside was intruding into something that was none of her affair—into a fabric of the past that had known its great and good moments and which belonged to just the three of them, to Cleve Fraser and Vance Ogden and herself. Then Les took hold of herself and called on her old dignity. She managed a fairly pleasant greeting, despite the mixed up and half-wistful turmoil inside her.

"Nobody home," she said. "Which means that Cleve and his crew have started into the mountains with the cattle."

This was a different Sherry Dane than Les had ever seen before. The usual bright manner was missing. She was grave and preoccupied and her eyes were shadowed. She spoke slowly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping to see Mr. Fraser. I've important word for him. I—I think it is important."

Leslie was startled. "Important—how? If you'd care to tell me it can be arranged for a rider to carry the word to Cleve."

Sherry considered for a moment, then nodded. "Very well. Here is the word. Rafter X is about to start around a thousand head of cattle up into the Sentinels. The destination is to be some place called the Garden. There will be a large force of riders with the herd. Grat Mallory will be in charge. The riders have orders to shoot their way through any opposition that arises. I would like to know that Mr.

Fraser has been warned of that."

Les Cormack stared at her, while anger lifted swiftly. "Rafter X cattle—in the Garden? Why, that's Cleve Fraser's best piece of summer range. That's range piracy which Rafter X intends! It's what everyone has feared—that Bunchgrass would not be enough to satisfy Pardee Dane. He's out to do what he has done in other places—drive other cattlemen out—hog their range—!"

Sherry Dane met Les Cormack's flaming glance very steadily. "That is what I'm afraid of," she admitted. "And I don't want it to happen, not to Cleve—Mr. Fraser. That is why I was bringing him word, hoping to warn him."

Les Cormack's turmoil of feeling did not lessen. Here was a new note and it shook Les up. This girl's concern for Cleve Fraser. Why? What was behind it? For the life of her, Les could not keep a chill stiffness out of her next words.

"You hardly know Cleve Fraser. Your concern seems strange."

"Doesn't it!" Just a hint of a weary smile touched Sherry's lips. "Only another woman could possibly understand it. At first I couldn't understand it myself. Now I do—so very well. You see, there was a day when I watched a man walk across a street. Cleve Fraser. He walked across that street to meet another man, a man with a gun. I had never seen anything like it before. It did things to me, inside. There was a flurry of shooting. And after that was done it was Cleve Fraser who stood there, unhurt. And I was never so thankful for anything in my life. Right then I knew that I never wanted anything to ever harm Cleve Fraser. If that sounds silly to you, it is still the truth. That is why I wanted to get this word to Cleve, so that he might be warned, in time. Which makes me both traitor and fool, no doubt."

A little tremor touched Sherry's lips and she pulled them taut to hide it.

Leslie Cormack had courage herself and she admired it in others. Her tone and manner softened.

"You are being very generous. Your uncle—he would not like—"

Sherry's small shoulders shrugged, but held resolute. "Uncle Pardee's business ethics are his own, not mine. I had never paid much attention to his past operations, in Ruby Valley or on Bidwell Plains. I was not around either place very much, being east most of the time, visiting. But here I've been, right from the first. I've overheard talk and I've seen things. Maybe I feel that Uncle Pardee could destroy himself if he's not turned back. But also I know somehow that the whole thing is wrong, and that Cleve Fraser must know in time."

"But you don't owe Cleve a thing—"

"Maybe I do. More than anyone can realize. Like—like an understanding of values I'd never considered before. At any rate, he *must* be warned."

"He will be," promised Les Cormack. "Come with me!"

They rode at a fast lope, heading for Shield and Cross. They rode in silence, each with her thoughts and each strangely aware of a certain kinship because of their sex and mutual feeling. Coming in on Shield and Cross headquarters, Les Cormack finally spoke again.

"You must come in and tell Dad what you've told me about that Rafter X herd. He'll handle the rest."

They slowed to a jog and then Sherry Dane pulled to a halt. "I'd rather

not go in," she said. "I could open up to you and you, being one of us fool women, could understand. But it would serve no point in my saying the same things to your father, who might wonder at my honesty. So it's better that I ride along now. This is probably good-by, Leslie Cormack. I shall be going east again before very long."

Les considered her, soberly. "Knowing Cleve, I'm sure he'd want to thank you."

"Thanks," said Sherry Dane, very steadily, "would be all—and not enough. There, now you know everything. But I've seen Cleve Fraser look at you. And a man like him looks at only one woman that way—ever. You are a very lucky person."

Small boot heels thumped equine ribs and then Sherry Dane was racing away. Her head was high and her shoulders straight and gallant.

Chapter Eleven

Summer Range

CATTLE in the timber. Cattle swarming, moving leisurely, but ever higher up the great flank of the Sentinels. Cattle in little groups and in long, ragged lines, working out in their own way the easier angles of the slope. Up gulches they traveled, where the forest mold lay deep and soft. And along ridge tops where the timber thinned and the sun had had its chance to work fully, so that plodding hoofs chopped up a dust that lifted and hung and winnowed through timber tops in a fine, golden-amber haze. And as the sun climbed and pressed increasingly down, the baked, resinous breath of the forest laid its own peculiar savor in a man's throat.

Moving along in the drag of the herd, constantly drifting right and left to keep the inevitable stragglers moving, Cleve Fraser knew a stir of the old satisfaction which these drives up to summer range had always given him. He liked the timber, with its broken patterns of sunlight and shadow, and he liked its piney fragrance. He liked its cloistered serenity and the soft stir of the wind in its lofty crests and the air's increasingly thin purity as the climb lengthened.

Most of all he liked the goal of the movement, the high green meadows and parks where, even in mid-summer, a man rose at dawn with frost crackling on his bed tarp. Days under a high free sun that warmed without oppressing and nights with the stars brilliant and close and a campfire giving off ruddy cheer and comfort, with all hands lounging in content within the circle of its light. Up there, a man was a long way from a troubled world.

A sweating, hard-working horse came up from below and dropped in beside Fraser. Fraser turned to look at Sam Tepner, foreman of Shield and Cross.

"How is it, Sam?" asked Fraser in some surprise. "Has Alec Cormack decided to drift some of his herd up here after all?"

Tepner shook his head. "Not that pleasant and simple, Cleve. Rafter X has got that idea. About a thousand head, pointed for the Garden. Plenty of riders, plenty of guns. Alec figured you'd like to know."

The musing content which pleasant thoughts had built up wiped swiftly from Fraser's face, replaced by a ripple of harshness. "So Pardee Dane

wants it rough, eh?"

"Would seem so," said Tepner. "Alec's sending the rest of the crew along, soon as they get necessary gear together. He's also sent word to Art Wilcoxon and Dab Shurtleff. Aims to suggest they throw in with you and us on this thing as a common chore, figuring that it's all or nothing for all of us."

"How did Alec hear of this Rafter X herd?" Fraser demanded.

"Why, it seems that Les was out riding and she bumped into that pretty little niece of Dane's. And Dane's niece told Les."

"Sherry Dane!" exclaimed Fraser, dumbfounded. "And she told Les?"

"That's right. Told Les to see that you were warned."

Fraser was silent for a long moment. "Why should she want to warn us of her uncle's plans?"

"Hell!" shrugged Sam Tepner, "how would I know? I never did waste time trying to figure out how a woman's mind works, because there never is any telling. Anyhow, Les is certain she got the truth. And it won't take too long to check up."

Soddy Joens was working the east flank of the herd and Fraser sought him out. "Take over, Soddy. Swing the cattle farther west. Take them into White Horse Glades. Enough grass and water there to hold over for two or three days if we have to."

Soddy's eyes sharpened. "Something's up. Thunder along the ridges, mebbe?"

"Maybe," said Fraser. "Let you know. Come on, Sam."

They swung directly east, putting their horses to it, and they rode fast and in silence. In time they came out on the crest of a ridge above the canyon where Red Bank Creek found its beginnings. Here they got their answer quickly. A long half mile below them thin dust haze was drifting up through the timber and faint but definite sounded the rumble of cattle, voicing bellowing complaint against driven movement.

"Why, now," said Sam Tepner, "I reckon there comes our trouble, Cleve. How high you figure they'll get by evening?"

"Not too far. Probably to the benches around Tamarack Springs. If I was bringing cattle up this way, that's where I'd head for. Mallory probably has it figured the same. Let's get out of here."

Heading back at a more leisurely pace, Fraser was locked in grim thoughts. Here, he knew, was showdown. Pardee Dane had played a trump card, thrown the issue right in his face and in that of every other resident cattleman along the range. If Dane got away with this, then he would try more. They could quit right now, or they could settle the issue once and for all, right here in these eternal hills.

Another thought that raked his mind back and forth was the fact of Sherry Dane's warning. What had prompted it? He thought of that evening in the kitchen of his own ranch house, of the miserable, disillusioned ending of it. And the judgment he had rendered there so savagely, he took back now in large part. People were what they were and no one could ever fully understand the depths of all the others. His mood grew somber and introspective as he rode.

Sam Tepner spoke just once. "Damn tough world at times, Cleve. A man works plenty for what he gets and then has to fight to hold it. Maybe that

makes it worth more. I wouldn't know."

They found the Saber herd already at White Horse Glades. Happy Harte was setting up a cooking fire, while Danny Cope worked with the pack string, unloading food and bedding and other gear. Soddy Joens and Big Bob Scanlon were throwing up a rope corral for the small remuda. Fraser called them together and gave them the story.

"Hell of a way to start a pleasant summer," said Soddy Joens after a short silence. "Aggravates me, this does. I'm liable to get real rough with some of them Rafter X hairpins. Bump Grat Mallory right in the teeth, should the chance come my way."

Big Bob Scanlon looked at Soddy with a narrow grin. He knew what a wicked old wolf Soddy could be in a fight. "Toughest talk I ever heard you make, Soddy. You must have been feeding on raw meat."

They passed it off this way, idly joshing. But deep inside every one of them was deadly serious, knowing the odds and chances and accepting them fully.

In the first dusk, Art Wilcoxon and Dab Shurtleff rode in at the head of their men. With them was the balance of the Shield and Cross crew. Greetings were brief and matter-of-fact. Dobe Roon took over at the fire and soon he and Happy Harte had a meal ready.

"Appreciate this," Fraser told Wilcoxon and Shurtleff. "It's fight, of course, but not over your range."

Art Wilcoxon shrugged. "In one way, no—in another, yes. If he pushed you out of the picture, Cleve, then he'd sight on the rest of us. We agreed with Alec Cormack that the smart thing is to put all the chips on this hand. You win, we all win."

"That's right," grunted Dab Shurtleff. "Whole hog or nothing."

On a ridge point above the glades a thick-limbed figure crouched behind a down log and watched the camp below. Beede Helser was a crooked man but also possessed a cunning shrewdness. He had bought more than one bunch of rustled cattle from Danny Cope and Vance Ogden and wanted more. On his last visit to the Lockyear cabin he had heard the word of Vance Ogden's savage finish. But the Lockyears didn't know what had become of Danny Cope. So Helser had started riding to find out some answers for himself. He had seen a big Rafter X herd leaving Bunchgrass and heading into the mountains.

Drifting farther west, Helser had come upon this camp in White Horse Glades. He had watched the camp being set up and he saw Fraser and Sam Tepner coming riding in from the east, saw Fraser gather his men about him and tell them something. Now he had seen Wilcoxon and Shurtleff ride in with their own and the Shield and Cross crews. He put all the items together and came up with the inevitable answer. War across the Sentinels.

Helser hunkered back on his heels, a brute bulk of a man, his broad, heavy face reflecting a satisfaction all his own. He measured his own interests in this thing and what he could profit from it. And the profit ran big—if he handled things right. He rose up for another look at the camp below, then backed away and went to where he had left his horse. Minutes later he was riding again, once more to the east. And an hour and a half later he was facing Grat Mallory across one of the campfires at Tamarack Springs.

"Helser," said Mallory, "you're a damned cow thief. I know it and you know it. This way and that I've heard plenty about you. You ought to be hung."

Helser stood, spread-legged, unabashed, a hard grin on his face. "Old saying about the pot calling the kettle black, Mallory," he retorted boldly. "But we won't go into that. The big point is just what I've told you. Fraser's got three outfits besides his own over at White Horse Glades. Do I have to write it in a book to show you what that means?"

"No," growled Mallory. "No, you don't. But you could be lying."

"I could be, but I'm not. And you know it."

Mallory considered this, scowling. "You're not telling me this out of the goodness of your heart, Helser. You see profit in it somewhere for yourself."

"That's right." Helser's hard grin was still working. "I never work for fun. You bust Fraser and then I'll make out all right."

Mallory saw it then. "And if Fraser managed to bust me, you'd still make out all right—on Rafter X cattle; is that it?"

"The fight," said Helser, "is between you and Fraser. I'm playing along with what I figure is the strong side. There'll be plenty Saber cattle running loose when this is over. I'll take my pick."

"I could," reminded Mallory, "give one yell and you'd never leave this camp alive."

Helser's eyes glinted, but his grin stayed on. "Nice reward that would be for me bringing you this word. Yet, I thought of that possibility. You give that yell, Mallory, and it would be your last. I don't always work alone, you know. For all you know somebody's got you in the sights of a Winchester, right now."

Mallory's head jerked up and his head swung warily as his glance touched the surrounding blackness of the timber. Helser reminded, "You're a fat target in this firelight."

"All right," rapped Mallory. "Get out! You'll still live to hang."

"A possibility every man has to face," jeered Helser, backing away into the shadows.

Mallory sat for some time by the fire. He knew that the hand had been dealt, and that he must play the cards he held. He mused over what Beede Helser had told him and, though the man was a thoroughly unsavory scoundrel, he knew Helser had told him the truth, simply because in this case it served Helser's interests to do so. Those massed outfits over with the Saber herd could mean only one thing. That which Cleve Fraser had promised Pardee Dane. Trouble.

Considering all the angles with an objective shrewdness, Mallory deemed it logical that Fraser would attack, try and spring a surprise, and at the earliest opportunity, which could very well mean this night, or early tomorrow morning. Mallory stood up, called in Chess Breshear and Loop Scarlett, and went into a huddle with them.

Beede Helser, drifting back through the night and riding high, came in above White Horse Glades just in time to see a dark mass of riders move away from the fire and head east, toward Tamarack Springs. One man alone remained with the Saber herd, hunkered by the fire. Danny Cope.

Beede Helser laughed softly. This couldn't be better. Cope was down

there and he knew how to handle Cope. The significance of Danny Cope's being one of Fraser's crew was a little thick for Helser to figure out, but he didn't worry about it any. He still knew he could handle Cope.

For a long time after the others had gone, Danny Cope sat by the fire. Then he rose, got his horse, and rode a slow and careful circle about the glades, holding the cattle in there, where they were already beginning to bed down. When Danny got back to the fire it was beginning to gutter toward coals and Danny did not try and build it up again. He spun another cigarette and hunkered down, set for an all-night watch. And it was then that a voice sounded behind him.

"Cope, this is the chance you and me been waiting all our lives for!"

For a long moment Danny did not stir. That voice—he remembered it well! He turned his head and said, "Hello, Helser. What brings you 'way over here?"

Beede Helser moved up beside Danny with a heavy-legged, rolling step. He made a thick, bull-shouldered figure in the fire's thinning light. A sly and chilling grin pulled at his heavy lips.

"Just drifting around, having a look at things. Mighty interesting ride. Lot of whitefaces bunched over around Tamarack Springs and another fat herd here. When the big fellows get to warring among themselves, that's when the little one comes into his own. Strikes me a couple of enterprising men could do right well by themselves, tonight. Stir up that fire a mite. I'm hungry."

Helser's first words had been almost idle. His last carried a rough snap.

Danny Cope did not argue. He freshened the fire, cooked coffee and bacon from the grub packs. Beede Helser watched him with unwinking intentness. A little chill began working up Danny's spine.

"Heard about Ogden getting strung," went on Helser. "Didn't surprise me. That hombre wasn't right. Weak stuff underneath. Don't tell me he was working alone?"

"No, he wasn't," said Danny. "I was along, but I was lucky. I got clear without being seen." Danny knew he had to lie about this. "Where's Frank and Hardy?"

Helser twitched a careless shoulder. "They got stubborn. Weren't satisfied with their share of the profits. I got no patience with stubborn people."

The chill along Danny's spine deepened. Here was both statement and threat. Helser didn't have to elaborate for Danny to understand. Frank and Hardy were dead, and Helser had killed them in some argument over the proceeds for rustled cattle.

Danny built another smoke, concentrating so that his hands worked without tremor. He thought of the last time he had seen Helser and his two partners, over at the Lockyear cabin when he and Vance Ogden had delivered that jag of rustled cows to them. And now Helser's partners were dead—

"You're doing guard on Saber cattle," said Helser. "Which means you must be working for Fraser. What's the idea—you getting religion?"

Danny shrugged. "It was awful close the other day and after what happened to Ogden I figure I'd better ride for wages again until things quieted down. Fraser was looking for an extra hand, so I took on with him."

Hunkered down across the fire, Helser gulped his coffee greedily and ate with rough and hungry haste.

"No man ever got rich ridin' for wages, Cope," he mumbled. "Here's our chance to make a real stake. I been around here watching, since this herd first hit these glades. I saw Fraser and the rest ride out. I know where they're going and what they figure to do when they get there. Even if they're lucky it could be noon or later tomorrow before any of them get back here. Maybe they won't even be that lucky. Maybe by the time the smoke clears away this herd won't even have an owner any more. See what I'm driving at?"

Danny Cope saw, all right, and he could see what else was coming. He touched his lips with the tip of his tongue, eyes fixed on the fire. He watched a thin filament of flame lick in and out of a glowing coal. Each time the flame showed weaker and thinner and presently it did not show any more. And the coal, so dying, began to turn gray. That was the way, Danny thought, that life could run out of a man.

"You and me," said Beede Helser, "we'll take as big a chunk of this herd as we can manage and then drive all night. Timber thins fast, up above. Come daylight we'll have a real start. I figure we can be over the crest of the mountains before Fraser and his crowd, even if they're lucky, can get back here. It'll take them more time to get things sorted out and hit our trail, even if they ain't too shot up to care. Yeah, Cope, here's our chance to make a real stake."

Danny fenced for time, a little desperately.

"Snow higher up. You're forgetting that, Helser."

"Hell I am. Sure there's some snow, but not too much to block all the high passes. And I know these mountains. We can do it."

A grayness came down over Danny's mind. *There's no way out of this but him or me,* he thought. *And I'm not as fast as he is. I got no chance of getting there first without some kind of break. And he's going to force it, yes or no—! He's asking me to sell out Cleve Fraser, the whitest man who ever walked. He's asking me to sell out Teresa and her folks. He'd use me and then kill me, just as he did Frank and Hardy. But most of all he's expecting me to be a dog of the lowest water.*

Helser was staring at Danny as though, with his little, glinting eyes, he would peer into the deepest corner of Danny's mind and see what was there. Danny steeled his will to hold the pressure back. And all the time a part of his brain was telling him that he had to find a break—a break of some kind.

Helser drained the last of his coffee, began building another cigarette, and now a new note of deadliness came into his voice.

"I'm going to do it, even if I have to do it alone. And if I do it alone you can bet I ain't leaving a witness behind in shape to talk—ever. Make up your mind, Cope!"

Helser's heavy teeth came together with a click on this last word and he snapped a match alight and lifted it in cupped hands toward his cigarette tip. And then Danny Cope made up his mind.

Rocking on his heels, Danny tipped over, falling on his left side, and his right hand slashed at his gun. He had the hard, cold butt of it full and solid in his hand and it came smoothly from the holster. Danny's gun was free and he pushed it toward that thick and menacing figure beyond the fire.

A gusty curse erupted from Beede Helser. The rustler was lunging upright, the lighted match dropping from his fingers, his hands pushing down, fast—very fast.

Danny's gun drove back in recoil against the tension of his wrist, once and then again. Report swelled up and slammed back and forth across the glades. Beede Helser lurched and swayed but stayed up there. Danny shot a third time. Helser coughed thickly, spun in a slow half circle, wavered, and fell.

Danny got to his feet, staring across the glades. The crashing echoes had brought a number of the bedded cattle to their feet and their gusty snorts were a hard breathing across the night. But they didn't run, and the rising stir held for a moment, then began to still and settle back again.

Danny slowly circled the fire. A cold and queasy sickness rumpled his stomach. It was the first time his gun had ever done anything like this. He got a blanket and spread it over Beede Helser.

Danny was dripping with sweat. It was even in his eyes, stinging. He cleared it away with a scrubbing sleeve and stood for a long time, dragging deep of the night air. Gunsmoke's acridness hovered for a time, then went away on the wings of a little night breeze that came slipping through the timber.

Danny began to steady down and his thoughts to clear. And he realized that fate could throw all the balance of a man's life into one roll of the dice and out of it could come much or nothing. Fate's dice had rolled this night and out of the gamble he had come whole and big. A true man who would, from now on, always be true.

On the dark slope of the Sentinels, well above Tamarack Springs, Cleve Fraser waited out the slow run of night's hours. In the stillness about him, other men did the same. Some were dozing, some were sleeping soundly, a snore here and there proof of this. Others, like him, were taking the wait wide-eyed and stoic.

They had laid their plans for this thing before leaving White Horse Glades. They would circle and come in above Tamarack Springs. There they would settle down and wait for the first gray break of dawn, when they would come down on Mallory and his Rafter X crew from above and with all the weight they could muster. It was a plan that had met with Soddy Joens's complete approval.

"Best time of day to pull a surprise," Soddy had said. "Just at dawn. The Injuns knew that."

On the way across the mountain slope they had refined the plan. Just before dawn, Art Wilcoxon would take a couple of men and slip around to the west side of Tamarack, while Dab Shurtleff would do the same on the east side. Their purpose would not be to attack so much as to harass and confuse. And again it was Soddy Joens who summed up the strategy.

"Feller trying to concentrate on what's looking him dead in the eye,

can sure be mighty disturbed by somebody throwing rocks at him from the side," was the way Soddy had put it.

With the major part of the combined crews, Cleve Fraser was to come down from above in a fast, hard rush calculated to throw the Rafter X herd into stampede, downhill. Once that herd got going it wouldn't stop short of the bottom.

It was simple enough to lay out the plan. It wouldn't be so simple to put into effect. It would be wild riot and there would be dead men to face the next day's sun with sightless eyes. It was something no sane and balanced man wanted, but it was something that had to be done. If it were not, then the days of all else but Rafter X interests were numbered.

Considering these things in the silence of his thoughts, Fraser knew a thin and bitter rage toward the guiding minds behind the Rafter X maneuvering. Pardee Dane, cold-eyed, cold-minded, already holding so much, but still reaching and grabbing for more. Playing this thing like a game of chess, with the lives of other men as pawns and the power of his wealth and influence as his queen. Men like Pardee Dane had laid a pattern of graves all across the West and neither cared nor knew remorse.

Then there was Grat Mallory, with his smooth, dark face, his shadowed eyes and his faint, sly smile. A malignant man who touched others and turned them bad. As he had done with Vance Ogden. And so Vance was dead, dying a savage and dishonored death that could leave its scar on others perhaps for a lifetime.

Fraser stirred restlessly as he considered Grat Mallory. That man, he told himself fiercely, was his! Yes, as long as affairs had come to this pass, then Mallory was his. Of course, the fates might will it differently. No man knew his ultimate destiny. He might hope and he might plan, but the fates called the final turn of the card. There were always a thousand maybes—

There was a stir at Fraser's elbow. It was Soddy Joens, coming up silent as a ghost.

"Time to get moving, Cleve," murmured Soddy. "First light will be showing in another half hour. Best stir up Wilcoxon and Shurtleff and send them on their way. And the rest of us should move in closer before we bust loose on the big run."

Fraser got to his feet, stretched the cramp from his muscles, tipped his face to the dark's moist breath. They understood each other, he and Soddy Joens did. Soddy, grizzled and wise and liking the pose of acid pessimism to cover a keen appreciation of the savor of life, and who was faithful and as gentle or tough as the occasion required. Soddy had been riding for Saber ever since Fraser was a long-legged stripling and, though Fraser had long since reached man's full estate, with confidence in his own decisions, he liked to have the balance of Soddy's opinion to back up his own.

"What do you think, Soddy?"

"We've done our thinking," answered Soddy. "We've been dealt a hand. Nothing to do now but to play it the best way we know."

Wilcoxon and Shurtleff, with those who were to side them, rode off, circling right and left, wary and careful in the dark. Fraser gave them a few minutes' start, then began moving down the slope with his own force.

In the east the horizon line was no longer black, but brushed with chill

gray. The stars had lost their luster, seemed to be slipping away into some vast and hiding distance. A stir of life was beginning to tumble up, sensed rather than felt or heard or seen. The world was waking and dawn was moving in.

They quickened their pace, reaching the crest of the sharp down pitch which led into the benchland where lay Tamarack Springs. A dawn breeze, sweeping up the mountain flank, carried to them the sound and smell of a cattle herd beginning to stir to a new day. The bawl of a critter carried up, a lonely sound across the dawn's great waking.

"Best get at it," said Soddy. "When cows begin to stir, men start rolling out of their blankets."

Fraser rode high in his stirrups, filled his lungs, and let go with a shrill yell. Then his dun was over the crest and racing downward. Behind him came the others, taking their cue from him, sending a high, wild crying across the startled world.

Chapter Twelve

Long Tally

THERE was a thin barrier of scattered jack pines and through this Fraser's big dun horse broke with a powerful plunging, hurtling into the clear beyond. On one side of him was Soddy Joens, on the other Dobe Roon, of Wilcoxon's outfit. It had been Fraser's thought that beyond the jack pines they would strike the upper fringe of the Rafter X herd. But the cattle were not here. Nothing was here but emptiness.

And then a yell, whipping out from the dawn's tricky shadow ahead, a yell lost in a running line of winking gunflame and snarling report. On Fraser's left a bullet told with an ominous thump, and Dobe Roon, who wielded a cook's skillet in peace and a use-worn gun in war, humped far over his saddle horn for two more jumps of his horse, then plunged down to the earth and the everlasting shadows.

Something fanned Fraser's face with an ominous hiss and farther along a horse screamed wildly, reared and collapsed in a tangle of threshing hoofs, throwing its rider, rolling.

It was Soddy Joens who got the significance of this thing first and voiced it with a long shout. "Back! Back into the jack pines! We've rode into something—!"

Fraser set the dun up hard, the big horse sliding and rearing as it tried to brake against the slope and turn. There was a smashing blow and shock and Fraser thought the dun was hit until he punched a hand down against his saddle horn to brace himself against his mount's frantic scrambling. Under his hand the saddle horn was a shattered mess of bullet-torn leather and rawhide. The dun, finally around, lunged powerfully as it drove back into the jack pines. On his head, Fraser's hat shifted slightly. Maybe the whip of a branch, maybe the whip of something far more deadly.

On either hand, horses were crashing through the cover and men cursing in a thin and scalding fury. Fraser yelled, "Soddy!"

"Right here!" answered Soddy, close by. "Cleve, they knew we were coming. They were waiting for us!"

"Out of your saddles!" yelled Fraser. "Get close to the ground and give it

back to them!"

His heels dug into the soft mold of the slope and he dragged his rifle from the scabbard under his stirrup leather. Then he drove back to the fringe of things. The clamor of guns from below was one long, crashing report. Lead ripped steadily into the jack pines, showering down shredded debris. Bullets told solidly against firmer wood and one, glancing off something, wailed off in a ricochet's quick-rising, then equally quick-fading, whine. A horse, bullet-stung but not disabled, raced crazily off through the tangle and a man cried bitterly, "Who got the surprise? Us—not them!"

Hunched on one knee at the edge of the jack pines, Fraser ran through every shell in his rifle, holding under those winking gun flashes below. He threw each bullet as he would a muscular blow, swinging the rifle's lever swiftly, knowing a fierce satisfaction in the thump of recoil against his shoulder. When the rifle clicked empty and he began shoving fresh shells into the loading gate, Soddy Joens, not ten feet away, set another rifle to snarling and Fraser, watching, saw the gun flashes below waver raggedly. Soddy could be a grim and savage old wolf at this sort of thing.

On either side, other guns took up the deadly song, and Soddy, his gun now empty, spoke almost calmly as he reloaded. "This is better. That gang below made one big mistake. They opened up too soon. If they'd waited until we got closer they'd have cut us to rags before we'd have got to cover. As it is—! You all right, Cleve?"

"All right," rapped Fraser harshly. "But I've led the boys into something. If I hadn't been so damn sure—!"

"Nothing's sure—ever," replied Soddy. "They ain't too comfortable down below. Wait until Wilcoxon and Shurtleff buy in!"

Wilcoxon and Shurtleff "bought in" at this moment. From both right and left added guns sent more echoes rocketing. The effect was immediate. The raggedness of the Rafter X line below grew more pronounced and it was Grat Mallory's voice that lifted in a shrill and angry yell.

"Breshear right—Scarlett left! Get at those flanks!"

For long minutes the battle ran its way, while the dawn light grew and brought discernible substance out of what had been illusory and shrouding shadow. Fraser, watching, searching with more care for targets, now that the first impotent anger had burned out, caught a skulking figure in movement on the bench below and shot for the first time with certainty. He saw the figure stumble and fall.

"Damn!" said Soddy Joens evenly. "You shot that one right out from under my sights, boy. But this won't do. We got to put more pressure on 'em. It's risky, but I think we ought to ride in, now."

From below a panicked yell drifted up. "Our horses! They've scattered our horses!"

Soddy Joens jumped to his feet. "Hear that?" he exulted. "Wilcoxon or Shurtleff played it smart. They've put that crowd afoot. Here's our break!"

Fraser yelled, "We're going down. Into your saddles—we're going down!"

Fraser located the dun, swung up, and went lashing out of the tangle. On either hand men burst out with him, heading down across the benchland at a wild run. Every man understood the advantage that had fallen to them. Rafter X was afoot and only a saddle

man could understand another saddle man's dismay over such a prospect.

Speeding hoofs closed distances fast. Fraser was surprised how light it had become. Dawn mounted swiftly toward day, once it started. He saw men in the big, scattered timber across the bench. They were on foot, all of them—dodging from tree to tree. He saw one of these figures, racing to the left, stop in midstride as though hitting an invisible wall. The man turned completely around, took two steps back the way he had come, then fell on his face. Those flanking guns of Wilcoxon and Shurtleff were deadly.

A man appeared suddenly from behind the massive bole of a towering ponderosa pine, gun stabbing flame now pale in the growing day. And then the horse of Concho Payne, a Shield and Cross rider, was charging about with an empty saddle. The man who had fired the fatal shot ran out, tried to catch the horse as it whirled by. But Sam Tepner, hurtling in, gunned the fellow into the ground from ten-foot range.

Resistance was something a man could sense as well as feel. The lessening and breaking-up of it was the same. Cleve Fraser could sense that breaking-up, now. Several angles of influence entered into this. Mallory's men knew no allegiance beyond the limit of their wages, while the men who drove at them had made this range, spent their lifetimes here, dug their roots deep and built for the long run of their future. This made a difference.

For another thing, that flanking fire had been unexpected and wicked. Mallory had guessed correctly the main attack from above and had been set for it. But he had forgotten his flanks. He could have held that frontal attack and broken it. But the flanking fire had raked his forces into near panic.

And finally, the Rafter X remuda had been broken and scattered, putting riding men afoot, a position they never had and never would like. The first break in a dyke might be only a trickle, but the trickle could quickly become a flood. It was that way now. Fraser and his men slashed clear across the bench without being stopped and came up against the herd that Mallory had held at the edge of the main slope break-off.

Soddy Joens, pounding up beside Fraser, yelled, "No better time than now to start 'em running, Cleve. This can clean the slate!"

Cattle—white-faced cattle—the slope was packed and crawling with them, astir and uneasy from the wild madness above them. Fraser and Soddy and Sam Tepner and Happy Harte piled into them, with other riders striking right and left.

Guns slammed lead and flame into the ground before bulging, terrified bovine eyes. Yells rocketed up, riata ends whirled and thudded. The cattle began to pack and shift, driving in tighter and tighter, shoving, lunging, bellowing, trampling. A living wall against which the pressure built and piled. The cattle became a great, shaking mass, a gathering force that must soon explode in some direction. That direction started downward.

It was the core of the herd that began to move. It took on power, a driving wedge that split the center. It took on speed, its voice a hoarse and bellowing thunder, while the solid mountainside seemed to shake under the roll of hoofs. Faster drove the wedge—faster!

The wedge drove through, became an avalanche, pouring down the vast

slope. It seemed to leave a vacuum behind it that sucked in the east and west flanks and fringes of the herd, sucked them in and pulled them along. It rolled and pounded on into the mists of the lower reaches, leaving behind a long and fading rumble and the heavy breath of animal frenzy and heat.

Fraser reined in, sent out a reaching yell. "That does it! Hold up—hold up!"

They came spurring in from either side, grim but jubilant. "Quick delivery of a thousand of his best right back into Pardee Dane's lap!" exulted Soddy Joens. "Let him chaw on that!"

"Just part of the chore," reminded Sam Tepner harshly. "A fight still on our hands."

They rode back, and along the bench. Guns were still belting the echoes about, out on the flanks.

"Split up!" ordered Fraser. "Half that way—half this!"

He led the way to the east, glimpsed a couple of furtive figures. "Watch yourselves!" he yelled. "Lay off the gun work and you won't be hurt!"

The pair of Rafter X riders stepped warily into the clear, hands spread and half lifted, wanting no further part of this thing.

"Mallory?" rapped Fraser. "Where is he?"

"Don't know," growled one. "And don't give a damn. I'm sick of this mess. I'll punch cattle for fifty and found, but I don't fight Pardee Dane's battles for such."

To the west, all shooting suddenly stopped, but over on the east flank guns kept pounding. Drawing Soddy with him, Fraser spurred that way. Here an ancient storm had left a scattered tangle of blow-down timber and three figures were skulking through it, shooting back at targets neither Fraser or Soddy could see. One of the three figures rose to full height to draw sight on something. A rifle whanged thinly and the figure melted down and Dab Shurtleff's heavy yell of triumph sounded. The other two came scrambling and dodging back toward Fraser and Soddy, not aware of them until they were within a short thirty yards. These two were Chess Breshear and Grat Mallory.

It was Breshear who sensed the threat behind him. He came around and threw a shot with the speed of a striking snake. Fraser, his left hand high, reining the dun, felt fire and shock strike his forearm, jerking it around and spinning the dun that way before the reins fell from nerveless fingers, and this swift turn of the dun pulled its rider away from the bullet Grat Mallory threw right after Breshear fired.

Fraser drove a knee into the dun's shoulder and brought it back, facing the blow-down. He heard Soddy Joens shoot once—twice. He saw Chess Breshear go backward over a down log, saw his booted feet swing high, then settle limply across the log. And he saw Grat Mallory, hung with indecision for a vital moment, not knowing whether to try for Fraser again, or for Soddy Joens.

Grat Mallory! There was no smooth and mocking slyness about him now. His dark face was convulsed, cross-pulled with madness. No mask here, no slippery elusiveness. Just the man's full measure of malignancy broken loose, hungry to strike and kill. Because here was the final hand and the realization was upon Mallory that he hadn't held enough cards after all, while those he had held he had played badly.

Fraser's belt gun was heavy in his right hand and now he bleakly dropped it into line and drove a single shot past the dun's weaving head.

Grat Mallory staggered and began to shrink down. His face was suddenly all drained skin and bony angles. Then the tautness ran out of him, his head rolled, and he fell at the edge of the blowdown, face to the patient earth.

Fraser's shot seemed to put a period to everything. Now there was no more shooting and the silence seemed to hold the quality of thunder itself, so swift was the abrupt change. But right after this came the thin, echoing clamor of men's voices and Fraser heard Dab Shurtleff's weighty shout, calling to someone.

Soddy Joens pushed in beside Fraser, voice grim with concern. "Where'd Breshear get you, boy?"

Fraser looked at his left arm. The sleeve of his denim jumper was all soggy between elbow and wrist and his nerveless hand was slimy with dripping crimson. He put away his gun and stepped from the saddle. Soddy dropped down beside him, helped him out of his jumper, made swift examination of the wound, and clucked with soft relief.

"Feels like so much lead," gritted Fraser, his lips pulled thin.

"The bone ain't smashed," Soddy said. "Slug skidded right along it, numbing it. It'll be feeling like something different than lead before long and you'll know it. Steady now, while I tie it up."

Now the benchland was astir with riders, moving in from all sides, and there were figures on foot being rounded up and bunched. Dab Shurtleff and Art Wilcoxon came spurring in.

"Picked yourself up something, eh?" growled Shurtleff. "Not too bad?"

"No, not too bad," Fraser told him. "I'm afraid some of our boys weren't as lucky."

"That I know," said Shurtleff harshly. "Slip Kent for one. Two or three of the opposition made it pretty tough out on my side. Last I saw of them they were ducking into this blowdown. I figure I got one of them. Mallory—you see anything of him?"

Soddy Joens jerked his head. "Take a look."

Shurtleff twisted in his saddle, stared a moment. He looked at Fraser. "You?"

Fraser nodded. "Breshear's yonder, past that log. Soddy handled him. There's another farther out."

Soddy said, "I'll go take a look."

When Soddy returned, he said simply, "Loop Scarlett. They were the tough three—Scarlett, Breshear, and Mallory. You stampede their horses, Dab?"

"No. Musta been Wilcoxon who did that. Damn smart move, Art."

Art Wilcoxon, grave and slender and straight, shrugged. "Seemed like a pretty good idea. Cleve, they knew we were coming in."

"They knew," nodded Fraser. "How they learned, I don't know. But they knew. Their big mistake was in opening up too soon. They'd have cut us to pieces if they'd let us get in closer before starting to shoot. As it is," he ended wearily, "we've paid a price."

None knew how big a price until they had ridden and looked and called a tally. They found Dobe Roon and Concho Payne and Slip Kent, crumpled and still. Sam Tepner had a shallow groove along the ribs and Nate Lyons was stumbling around on foot, still groggy from a savage fall when his horse had been shot out from under

him.

Besides Mallory and Breshear and Scarlett, there were two other Rafter X riders done for, while a third was in serious shape from a chest wound. So ran the grim tally.

Fraser looked over the Rafter X men who had been rounded up and realized once more that Art Wilcoxon had pulled the shrewdest stroke of all in stampeding the Rafter X remuda. Being put afoot did something to a saddle man—cut his stature and confidence in half. And these men, brought in from the outside, had never understood the true picture of this thing.

"I don't know how much you men figure you owe Pardee Dane," Fraser told them harshly. "But if you think the wages you draw are worth it, you can stick around and try it again. Only next time it will be twice as rough as today. Your choice. You'll leave your guns here and start walking. If your feet hold out you'll make it to Red Bank Creek headquarters. Get going!"

The office at the Rafter X headquarters was crowded and Pardee Dane, for the first time in his life, had the feeling of being trapped and helpless. He had all he could do to keep this feeling hidden as he faced three grim-visaged men across the room's narrow width. Cleve Fraser, Art Wilcoxon, and Dab Shurtleff.

Pardee Dane had conceived a plan, a plan of range conquest. He had tried it in Ruby Valley and on Bidwell Plains and it had worked in both places. It seemed fool-proof, so he had tried it again, here in the shadow of the Sentinels. And it had blown up in his face.

If Pardee Dane wanted to turn his head and look out a window, he could see, over across the compound in the shadow of a shed overhang, a row of still figures laid out. Three of those figures were Grat Mallory and Chess Breshear and Loop Scarlett, men who had made his great scheme work in Ruby Valley and on the Bidwell Plains. But they were dead, now, and the gray shadow of this realization was a cold shroud that seemed to clog Pardee Dane's mind. He forced himself to look at Fraser and Wilcoxon and Shurtleff and the stark hostility he saw there seemed to press him into a corner. Fraser spoke.

"You would have it, Dane. Bunchgrass Basin wasn't enough. You and your damned grass greed! You were warned, but you didn't think we meant it. Now you know that this isn't Ruby Valley or the Bidwell Plains. We'll go further than this to prove it to you, if we have to. Well?"

"Think this over, too," growled Dab Shurtleff with his usual heavy bluntness. "I never was one to beat around the bush. Fundamentals have always been good enough for me. You stir up another ruckus and I don't fool around with just your hired hands. I come straight for you, and I come with a gun in my hand!"

Outside, hoofs pounded up, and it was Sheriff Bill Hammer who stepped from a sweating bronc and stood for a moment, cold of eye and face, looking at the row of figures under the shed overhang. Then he turned on Soddy Joens, who lounged near by, and shot a string of harsh questions. After which Hammer came swiftly to the office door, pushed it open, and stepped in.

Pardee Dane drew courage from sight of the sheriff and the star. He got a perfecto from his pocket and

lighted it and then said smoothly, "I'm glad you are here, Sheriff. With your own eyes you see the savage results of an utterly unprovoked attack on my men and—"

"Shut up!" Bill Hammer's words were like the cut of a whip. His glance bored at Fraser. "Tell me about it."

Fraser did so, tersely direct. Pardee Dane added his say quickly.

"You see, Sheriff—he admits it. My men did not attack. It was these men who did, along with their crews. And I demand redress by law. I shall prosecute to the full." Dane would have said more, but Bill Hammer's coldly bitter stare held and silenced him.

"Let's get one thing clear, Dane," said Hammer harshly. "I don't like men like you. I don't like men who, because they have heavy money behind them and influence in certain quarters, set out to stomp on the necks of other men, to grind them down and break them, and then grab off range these men have worked and sweat blood to own and develop. And I don't like men like you who hire other men to do the fighting and dying, while you sit back to lap up the gravy. Those are my personal sentiments. Now, here is an official one. The law doesn't look kindly on the man who hires gun fighters and pays them cold cash in advance to gang another man and smoke him down. The law calls that accessory to attempted murder!"

A startled flicker showed, far back in Pardee Dane's eyes. He used a moment to touch a freshening match to his perfecto. Then he said, "I say again that my men did not attack at Tamarack Springs. They were set upon by Fraser and these others."

"I'm not referring to that at all, Dane," said Hammer. "I'm referring to something else. I'm referring to your hiring the Lockyear brothers to gang Cleve Fraser and shoot him down. They tried, one day in town, and it didn't work out that way."

The tip of Dane's perfecto glowed with sudden brightness. "I've been lied about before."

"No lie this time, Dane," snapped Bill Hammer. "I just came from having a talk with the Lockyears. While clearing up that stage-robbery affair, I saw that several things across this range needed ironing out. The past, present, and future of the Lockyears' activities was one of these. You never know how a man's mind may work, Dane. In this case it was Trace Lockyear's thinking that surprised.

"You see, that day in town, Cleve Fraser could have killed Nolly Lockyear. But he didn't. He just shot a leg out from under Nolly. That made a deep impression on Trace Lockyear. He'd been thinking about it ever since and it was a generosity that Trace couldn't get over. He asked me to tell Fraser that he'd never have any trouble from the Lockyears again and he admitted flatly that the reason he and Nolly tried for Cleve that day, was because, through Grat Mallory, you hired them to do it and paid hard cash—in advance."

Pardee Dane was getting a little of his self-possession back. "The word of an acknowledged cattle thief and no-good against mine, Sheriff?"

Bill Hammer's laugh was a short, mirthless bark. "And is your word pure gold, Dane? Never mind. Trace Lockyear is willing to swear to his in court. Said he felt he owed that much to Fraser after Fraser's generous move. And the court will always consider seriously the sworn word of any man.

So, if Cleve Fraser will swear out a warrant, I'm going to slap an arrest on you, Dane. I'm going to put the cuffs on you and drag you out to the lockup at Breed's Junction the same as I would any other cheap crook. You may have influence in some quarters, but this range belongs to the men who built it and in these parts they call the turns."

Pardee Dane's self-possession began to slip again and his sense of trapped desperation deepened. Abruptly he realized how much he had depended upon Grat Mallory in the past. It was Mallory who had handled the rough edges of these range conquests for him, while he sat back in security. It was Mallory who had done the dirty work, ramrodded the crew, got down into the dust and dirt and sweat and blood and made things move. He had been leaning on Grat Mallory more than he dreamed. But Mallory was dead, now—

Fine sweat beaded Pardee Dane's dry, precise features. He was thinking of the ignominy of being taken to jail in handcuffs. Even if he beat the charge the stigma would still be there. And what of Bunchgrass Basin without Grat Mallory to handle the affairs of its wide-spread acres? Bunchgrass was his, all right, and as long as he stayed within the limits of it his interests there would be secure. But even so, from now on it would be an island in a sea of never-ending hostility. These men whom he had set out to wrong and ruin would never forget and their hatred and enmity would always be stalking at his side.

Abruptly, Pardee Dane knew he was whipped. There was a streak of gambler in the man, cold, precise, merciless when he held high cards, but never foolish enough to call a bet when he didn't. And he didn't hold the high cards on this deal. It was time to toss in his hand. His pride, his sense of cocksureness, the presumed infallibility of his planning, all were going to take a beating. But this game had gone sour, very sour, and he wanted no more of it.

"What," he asked abruptly, "is Bunchgrass Basin worth to you men?"

For a moment Art Wilcoxon and Dab Shurtleff did not grasp the implication of this startling question. But Cleve Fraser did and he gave Dane no chance to overplay a bargaining hand.

"Part of the price will be whether I do or do not swear out that warrant for arrest. Aside from that, considering the improvements you've put in here in this headquarters, plus what you paid for Bunchgrass in the first place—I'd say fifty thousand dollars would be fair all around."

Pardee Dane met Fraser's boring glance, held it for a little time. This was the man whom he had sensed from the first was the one he would have to whip, and this man did not whip easy. Grat Mallory had understood that and had tried to warn him. But Mallory was dead. As far as it was possible for him to be in any way generous, Pardee Dane was generous enough at this moment to know a touch of real regret about Mallory. For Grat had been faithful—

Dane nodded. "Very well. Fifty thousand. And a clean break on everything else. I'll need a little time to move out the cattle I brought in."

"Agreed," said Fraser. "Fifty thousand and a clean break on the other angles."

"Fifty thousand!" blurted Dab Shurtleff. "None of us—"

"None of us alone, Dab," cut in Fra-

ser. "But between the four of us, Art and you and Alec Cormack and myself, we can swing it. What we should have done in the beginning, we now get around to." He turned to Bill Hammer. "If it's all right with you, Bill—we'll forget that warrant."

The sheriff's face was inscrutable as he nodded. "You're the doctor, Cleve."

Fraser looked at Pardee Dane again. "We'll see you at Burt Statler's law office in Mineral tomorrow morning at ten and close the deal."

Pardee Dane nodded. "I'll be there."

Chapter Thirteen

One Man's Future

THE afternoon was running out. Sunlight laid a long flat blaze across Bunchgrass and left a ragged shadow to follow along behind Cleve Fraser as he jogged toward Shield and Cross headquarters. His wounded arm, resting in a sling, felt as well as could be expected. He had stopped by in town to let Doc Curtain fix it up and Doc had done a good job of it, recommending a couple of days in bed, then adding with profane weariness:

"Damn sound advice which I know you won't take. You'd treat a horse better than you do yourself."

Weariness rode with him, but it was kind of a good weariness. The loose-muscled, let-down weariness that came after a long period of taut and grinding strain. Looking back, Fraser could see that this strain had begun the day of the government sale of Bunchgrass Basin. Even then some deep-seated awareness, an instinct, had told him something of what the sale had portended for this range, and warned him of the train of grim events sure to follow before some sort of satisfactory status quo could be arrived at. His instinct had not told him wrong.

Violence had come and gone. In many ways things would never be the same, for a man would always remember. People went out of a man's life, others came into it, if only for a little time. You glimpsed things which made men and women what they were and you wondered, but you never found all the answers.

The abrupt about-face of Pardee Dane was one of the things to wonder at. You wondered if the man was innately a coward, or if it was merely that he was cold-minded enough to recognize a checkmate for the present, and a future so full of conflict as not to be worth the price? You wondered over the warning that Pardee Dane's niece had brought, and why she had done so?

Fraser thumbed a pocket and brought out a small fold of scented note paper, which had been enclosed in an envelope that Henry Poe had given him after flagging him down in town. On the envelope had been written merely, *Cleve Fraser.*

"She asked me to give it to you at the first chance, Cleve," Henry Poe had said.

Fraser had read the enclosure right after leaving town. Now he read it again. It ran:

Cleve:

This is good-by. We learn things as we go along, don't we? Mainly that we can't beat life. I am neither as bad as I seemed nor as good as I should be. For you, my friend, the best of everything. And should you ever think of me, do so with kindness.—Sherry.

Fraser stared straight ahead for some little distance. Then, wedging the paper between a knee and the swell fork of his saddle, he shredded it carefully to very small pieces with his sound right hand and let the pieces drift to earth. No, to some things there were no answers.

Except for a gilding fire along the high reaches of the Sentinels, the sun was gone when Fraser rode up to Shield and Cross. Twilight held the land and its first cooling breath was a flickering sweetness against a man's face. Things were quiet at Shield and Cross and a suggestion of the old-time peace was there. But there was grief, too, for Concho Payne, a good Shield and Cross rider, had gone to his death up at Tamarack Springs.

It was Mother Cormack who met Fraser at the door. She was gravely sad, but swiftly concerned.

"Your arm, Cleve—how is it? Sam Tepner told us you'd been wounded in the fighting."

"It will be a nuisance for a while, but nothing worse," Fraser told her. "At the end of a day that's been about as rough as any I've ever known I can finally bring some good news with me, Mother Cormack. Alec will want to hear this."

She followed him into her husband's room. The old cattleman was grim and tired as he looked up at Fraser from beneath his shaggy brows.

"Once we talked about what could lie ahead, Cleve—after that damned Pardee Dane moved in on Bunchgrass," growled Cormack abruptly. "Well, it came. And I'd have given all of this cussed leg of mine if I could have made that ride with you and the rest of the boys this morning. We paid a price, but we gave them a damn good pushing around, so Sam Tepner says. How's that arm?"

"It'll do," answered Fraser briefly. "News for you, Alec. Pardee Dane's had enough. Bunchgrass is for sale again."

"What! Cleve, you know what you're saying?"

"Ease back and listen," said Fraser. And then he went on to tell Alec and Sarah Cormack all about it. When he finished, Alec Cormack exclaimed harshly.

"Hah! Turned coyote, did he, when the trail got rough? And I heard he was a cold proposition, not easy scared."

Fraser shrugged. "A hard man to figure, Alec. Maybe there's not the starch in him we first figured, or maybe he's just cold-blooded enough gambler to toss in a hand that's gone sour. Or maybe there's some other angle we just don't know anything about. All that really matters is that he's willing to sell and at a price you and I and Art Wilcoxon and Dab Shurtleff can swing between us. Art and Dab are willing, and between the four of us we should be able to draw up an ownership and grazing agreement on Bunchgrass that will make everybody happy. If that leg of yours can stand the ride I'll be by tomorrow morning

and take you to town in the buckboard."

"Damn right it'll stand the ride. I been telling Sarah there was no good reason for me sticking around this cussed bed any longer. Now I got the best excuse in the world to get out of it. Boy, I'll be ready!"

Going back to the outer door with Fraser, Mother Cormack noticed his questing manner. "Off riding again somewhere, Cleve. I declare if that girl doesn't act like she's possessed. Restless, uneasy, full of fits and starts. Stay to supper. Les should be back before too long."

Fraser shook his head, faintly smiling.

"Guess I'm possessed, too, Mother Cormack."

Twilight had become deep dusk by the time Fraser reached the shallows of Stony Creek below the bridge and he paused to let his horse drink. Halfway through this pleasant moment the dun lifted its head, ears pricked, muzzle dripping. Gravel crunched under other hoofs and then it was Leslie Cormack's tall sorrel which stood on the farther bank, with Les straight and still in the saddle. Fraser rode on across.

"Girl," he scolded gently, "you worry folks the way you skitter around. Your mother's fretting right now. Where you been?"

"Saber headquarters. Saw Soddy Joens there and he said you should be along 'most any time. I waited as late as I dared. I—I wanted to be sure about your arm, Cleve."

As always, this girl's voice was melody in his ears and her presence a deep and fulfilling comfort. For the moment he was content with just these.

"Sam Tepner brought us the news," went on Les. "I just couldn't stay still—after that. I liked Concho Payne. He was a quiet, steady rider. Life costs us all something, doesn't it?"

"Win or lose, there's a price," nodded Fraser. "Pardee Dane found that out. He's selling out, Les. Tomorrow, Bunchgrass comes back to the men who need it." He went on to explain briefly. "So," he concluded, "we end up just where we began, with much missing and nothing added."

She was still for a long time, brooding. Her sorrel stamped a restless hoof, tossed its head, fretting at the snaffle. Les quieted the animal and then said slowly:

"Nothing at all been added, Cleve?"

The way she spoke them, more than the actual words, brought him up straight, staring at her. It was too dark to read her face, but even the shadowy outline of her held the old grace. There was a quickening inside him.

"Les—what do you mean?"

"Maybe you think there is a shadow between us, Cleve. There isn't. Things I once thought were true never really were. That day when you faced the Lockyears in town—then I knew the real truth. I knew it—so well."

Fraser swung his horse closer. "But there was Vance, Les. I thought—"

"Yes," she cut in, "there had been Vance. Something that blinded the eyes of both us—for a time. But that never had been truly real. Why, even when I heard of Vance's death the sense of loss was a strangely distant thing. It hurt, of course, but it still left me completely whole. But that day in town—and these past hours, guessing—wondering what was going on up in the mountains—waiting to see you again come riding— Oh, Cleve—don't

you understand?" Her voice was shaking, throbbing.

His sound hand went out, capturing one of hers. "There never was the need of words to tell you how I've always felt, Les. Always, from the very first."

Her answer was whisper-soft. "I want to hear the words, Cleve."

The first stars were a glinting scatter and down from among them, a nighthawk early awing poured its cool, pure call.

THE END

POWDER RIVER PEOPLE

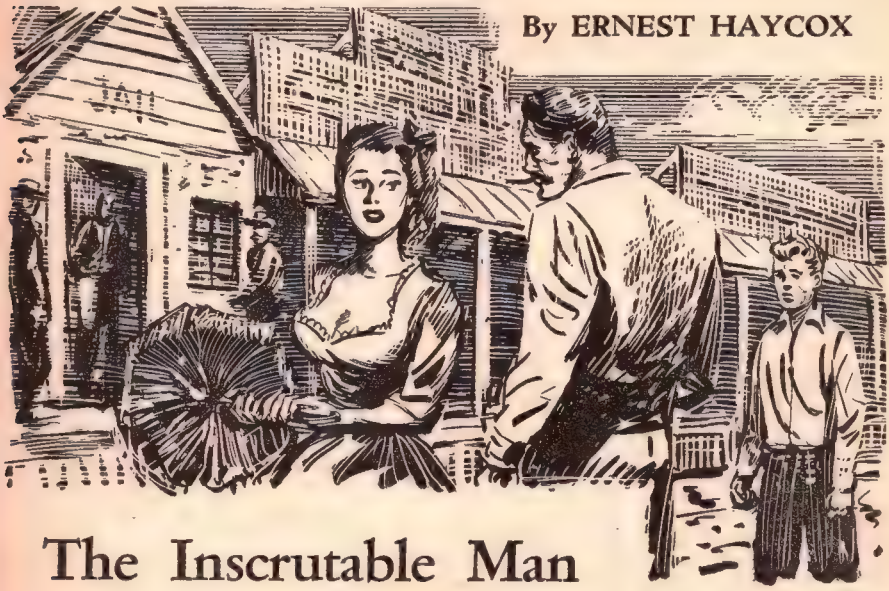
A Western Quiz by Bob Beaugrand

"A MILE WIDE AND AN INCH DEEP"—that's the best a lot of folks could ever find to say about Wyoming's Powder River. But the country around the Powder was grassland—bunchgrass that buffalo and cattle alike could thrive on. So plenty of American history was made in the Powder River country as men fought for control of the grass. In the right-hand column below are the names of ten men who figured prominently in that history, and in scrambled order in the left-hand column some clues that identify them. Match names and clues; if you do it right for eight or better, you're a good Powder River man yourself! Answers on page 158.

1. Rode 200 miles through Indians and snow to summon relief for Fort Kearney. ___ Jacques Lorimier
2. Gained name and fame by slaughtering buffalo wholesale in the region. ___ Father De Smet
3. Kept a diary of death while enemies besieged his cagin during the "Powder River War." ___ Tom Horn
4. Called "the last of the badmen," he was executed for the murder of a teen-age boy. ___ Thomas Twiss
5. Swiss-born ex-Army officer, this Indian agent married a Sioux, joined them when they fought. ___ Nate Champion
6. Ex-minister turned Army Colonel, he gained infamy in the Sand Creek massacre. ___ Butch Cassidy
7. Famous member of the Hole in the Wall gang, he was never known to shoot a man. ___ J. M. Chivington
8. Famous frontier figure whose chance remark started an influx of miners, led to the last Sioux war. ___ John Bozeman
9. A fort and way-point in the Great Medicine Trail was known by a mispronunciation of this early trapper's name. ___ John Phillips
10. Mountain man, he laid out, through Sioux country to the gold camps, the trail which bears his name. ___ William F. Cody

Bill Dolliver, the saloonkeeper with a secret, wields great power in the town of New Hope—over men's allegiances—over life and death—over a woman's happiness.

By ERNEST HAYCOX



The Inscrutable Man

MY FATHER lifted his cigar and spoke. "The Peach Creek stage was held up about an hour ago beyond Harriman's ranch. Hank Lacey was driving. He was shot in the chest."

We were on the porch, watching summer's soft twilight deepen—my mother and father and myself, and Glory Harper who sat on the steps. This was New Hope's suppertime, so still and peaceful an hour that the bell-like strokes of Rob Jenner's late-working blacksmith hammer came clearly from the far edge of town. A faint wind ran in from the west, bringing the savor of all that wild distance with it.

This was 1881 when the world was young and I was in a full and vivid boyhood which grows more and more strong in my memory. Long ago as it was, I recall the quick turn of Glory Harper's shoulders as she looked up to Father and showed the worry in her eyes. She was twenty, and more inclined to silence than most women are.

She said, "Why, that's one of Jeff's stages."

"He rode out there immediately he heard the news," my father said, and returned to his cigar.

That sharp darkness which comes to the plains dropped swiftly; along our little street house lamps threw thin lanes across the tawny-silver dust. A sprinkling wagon came by, and all at once the mingled scent of water and dust and scorched boards and prairie grass was keen through the night.

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Glory rose and stood a moment. Even then her presence and her personality were exciting to me, reaching out like the undertow of a current. Now that I am older I can see that it was the inner richness of a full-bodied girl waiting for expression, waiting to be spent. Afterward she said good night, and walked to the adjoining house where her aunt and uncle lived.

Her own parents, we understood, had died long before in the East, and the Harpers had taken her as a child. They seemed to have money, for Harper lived a quiet, retired life. I recall him as a dark and kindly man who always marched in the Fourth of July parade with the Phil Sheridan Post, G.A.R., very straight and soldierly in his captain's uniform.

My mother's rocker creaked on the porch boards. I knew she was disturbed. "The Cameron boys again, Tod?"

My father said, "I suppose," and smoked on.

There was a shadow sliding along our picket fence, which was Johnny Dix waiting for me. But I held my place, for Father was talking again and his tone was faintly sad and faintly bitter.

"The war's put a curse on this country. It has made killing a noble occupation. It's made heroes out of desperadoes like Quantrell and the James gang. The Cameron boys are simply following the pattern."

After an interval I started down the steps. Mother's voice stopped and turned me around. My father had removed his cigar and was looking at me more sharply than usual. He said, "Let the boy go. He'll have little enough fun in another few years."

I think he meant to speak to me. But he didn't and it is one of my deepest regrets now that he so rarely broke through his long-maintained silences, that he was almost a stranger to me. For I have come to understand that his silence was the silence of loneliness. He was one of the few really educated men in a town that had little time or patience for education; he had nobody with whom to share his tastes, and therefore he fed upon himself. It is one of the tragedies of this world that people build walls around themselves and slowly starve inside.

I went out to Johnny Dix and we trotted through the dark back streets, on over to the south edge of town where the rest of our gang assembled. We had a ritual and a procedure and presently we filed surreptitiously down the alleys of New Hope into the alien and dangerous territory along the river where the tough boys of Ward Two roamed. It is what comes across all the years to me, more real than anything else—the raciness, the freedom, the keen and sharp edge of that long-gone boyhood.

All the pieces of the story, so disjointed then, make a clear pattern now. I was standing on St. Vrain Street, across from the Beauty Belle, the next day when old Henry Nellis turned out of a near-by store and stopped a man whose name I have forgotten. Nellis was very excited. He said to this other man:

"Jeff McKay brought Hale Cameron to jail this morning. Lacey's dead."

I remember the chill that ran up my spine. It was always like this in New Hope. The humdrum days ran along and then excitement and violence burst over us, as swift and unexpected as a heat storm out of the south.

Nellis was saying something else,

but suddenly stopped, chopping a word between his teeth. Both men were staring across the street to the Beauty Belle and I turned and saw Big Bill Dolliver, who owned the saloon, come out of the swinging doors and shake his big shoulders and pause and light a cigar.

I do not know a better way to describe Big Bill Dolliver than by saying that though the width of the street was between Dolliver and these other men, they still feared him. I heard Nellis say in a bare breath, "I wonder what Bill thinks about it?" Afterward Nellis walked on and the other man turned into the store.

Dolliver had lighted his cigar; he crossed the street, passed me with one quick, stiff survey and went toward Linenweber's restaurant. I still feel the striking power of that glance and the taciturn, morose quality of Big Bill Dolliver's eyes. He was a central character in our town and everybody felt that physical jolt of his presence. I think the knowledge and the sensation of fear was left out of Big Bill Dolliver, that neither his brain nor his nerves had any way of understanding it.

He was not a big man, but he seemed tremendous to me; and there was about him always a massive indifference to the opinions of other people. It was as though a corsair spirit in him chafed at the small rules of a world he found himself in and did not like. The reflection of that was in his eyes—savage and smoky and domineering. He was about forty and finely built and kept bachelor quarters at the Occidental Hotel. But he went there only to sleep; all his waking hours were spent in his saloon, which was the most glitteringly luxurious thing in our drab and dusty town.

It was noon and I ran home, bursting with the news, and found my parents at the dinner table. I said, all in one breath, "Jeff McKay brought Hale Cameron to jail this morning and Lacey who drove the stage is dead."

My father looked queerly at me and merely said, "Yes." But my mother seemed very worried.

"He's growing up like a savage, Tod."

I sat down to eat. Then I saw Jeff McKay ride up to our front gate on his big bay and get off and come up the steps, and eating became impossible. The hero worship of a boy is a strange and wonderful thing and Jeff McKay, as he stood there in the doorway, was the sort of man I wanted to be.

He was twenty-three years old, which was the age of a seasoned man in those days, with Scotch-gray eyes and a tall, rawboned frame and the quietest manners imaginable. There was a deference and a humility to him, but he had—as subsequent events proved—a Calvinistic conscience and a Calvinistic will. It was these qualities that brought the storm down on him. Like most Scotchmen, he was full of ambition. He operated four stage lines into the west and Lacey had been a driver of one of his coaches.

He bowed and smiled at my mother, and spoke to me in a way that bound me fast to him. He said to my father in his slow, careful manner, "I wanted to ask your advice."

Father motioned to a chair at the table and Jeff McKay came forward and sat down. My mother got Father's eye and nodded at me. It was my signal to leave the table. But Father said, "Let him stay." I understand all that clearly now. My father would not

preach to me, but he wanted me to see and hear for myself so that I might absorb the ways of the world.

Jeff McKay said, "Lacey died. But I got there and had a word with him first. It was Hale Cameron who held up the stage and fired the shot. I found Hale and brought him in. It's my testimony that will hang the rope around his neck. Have I done right?"

My father spoke in a wondering voice. "How did you know where to find him? When you found him how did you get him away from the rest of the gang?"

"I found him," Jeff McKay said. It was softly said, yet behind the tone lay a terrible certainty I still remember. Then he repeated, "Have I done right?"

"According to your conscience," said my father wryly. "But conscience is a luxury in this country. The Cameron gang will never let you alone. Half the people in New Hope will hate you for trapping their hero and the other half will despise you for not killing Hale out on the prairie where you found him."

Jeff McKay got up. "We have laws," was all he said and he went out.

I was out of my chair immediately, following him to the porch, but he didn't stop. He went through the gate and led his bay horse to the Harpers' house. Glory was there waiting for him and I saw Jeff McKay bend a little and speak to her; they were both smiling and I laugh now to think of the jealousy that flared up in me. He said something else and they both ceased to smile. The sunlight cut down on them. They stood quite still, these two straight and robust people so much alike in their silence.

My father called me back into the house. He said gravely, "Whatever you have heard is something for our ears alone, Son."

My mother said, "It is a cruel, heartless country, Tod!" The anger was so unlike this soft-spoken woman that both my father and I were astonished. She looked at Father and seemed to accuse him.

"I'm thinking of Jeff and Glory," she told him and abruptly left the table. But in the kitchen she called back, "Why don't the men of this town do something?"

Father said, "What should we do, Mother?"

"You might start with Bill Dolliver."

I think something should be said about that wide and smoky land in that high-tempered time if the fury which burst through New Hope is to be understood at all. We had some good blood in our town, some families grown wealthy from the freighting trade; we had our schools and churches and our gentility. We were a settled community. Yet we dwelt on the edge of insecurity and violence.

South of us in Kansas and Missouri the bandit gangs still scourged the country and the border ruffianism of the war still smoldered. West of us lay the great prairie reaching out its trackless distances; a hundred and fifty miles that way the cattle trails and the trail towns still roared. We could not escape the impact of that raw world. Orderly as New Hope tried to be, there was in it still a primitive concept of personal justice. If a man injured you, you took your own vengeance upon him.

All that Father had said to Jeff McKay was true. The jury was scarcely impaneled to try Hale Cameron for the

murder of Lacey when New Hope began to burn with a strange fever. Boyhood impressions are keen, and I walked the streets and felt that excitement as clearly as though it were a hot wind rushing in from the prairie.

I saw men in town I had never seen before, surly-looking fellows off the distant cattle ranches, impoverished homesteaders from the roundabout coulees. Our own teamsters and stevedores, who seldom loitered on St. Vrain Street, now ranged there restlessly. To a good many of these men Hale Cameron was a hero, a Robin Hood, as Jesse James still was; and to many of them Jeff McKay was a coward for not having exchanged bullets with Cameron as a man should out on the prairie.

There was no peace for Jeff McKay and it was freely wagered he would die of a bullet from Dan Cameron, who was Hale's older brother, before the month was out. It was strange that the tidal wave of unreason should grip us so. But it did, and there were friends of Jeff who dared not show their friendship for him in the bitter weeks that followed.

I recall walking down St. Vrain Street the day before the trial with Glory Harper. She wore a white dress with ruffles on the sleeves and she held a parasol against the hot sun with a way of grace hard to describe. It was, I think, a rhythm inside this girl which flowed out of her and influenced whatever she touched.

The street was crowded, as though it were a holiday, and this feeling of excitement was stronger than ever. There was a rumor in the wind that Dan Cameron intended to raid New Hope with his gang and get his brother from jail and because of that the Phil Sheridan Post, G.A.R., had turned out to guard the whole length of St. Vrain Street; every hundred yards we passed a pair of these men standing against the building walls, guns strapped at their hips, all looking very solemn. Yet solemn as they were they lifted their hats to Glory and spoke to her.

Then somebody else spoke to her and I saw Big Bill Dolliver standing at the curb. He had taken off his hat and his black hair glittered in the sunlight and made all the rest of his face dark. He had a cigar between his teeth, but his lips were hidden by the long, heavy mustache he wore.

I remember feeling fear as I stared into his heavy round eyes; I feel the strike of them now. But I remember feeling hatred of the man, too, for I clenched my hands behind my back and stood at Glory's side. I had come to believe that somehow Jeff McKay's fortune lay in this stolid man's brain. Nor was I alone in that belief.

He said, "Good day, Miss Harper."

Glory stopped and lowered her parasol, and I looked up to see her smiling at him. She had no fear. She said, "I don't believe all the stories I've heard about you. Jeff needs help."

He took out his cigar and looked down. He brushed a flake of ash from his coat and lifted his head. "I hope you never will believe all the stories you hear about me. Don't worry about Jeff."

We went on and turned in at Jeff McKay's office beyond Linenweber's restaurant. There were two men at the door, but they stepped aside for Glory, and we walked through and found Jeff sitting on a high bookkeeper's stool, writing in a book. I remember he wore black sleeve protectors, and that there was a gun lying on his desk.

He got up and shook hands with me.

Glory said, "Mr. Dolliver spoke to me."

Jeff's eyes narrowed. He wasn't pleased, I could see. "It was forward of him."

But Glory smiled. "He was very courteous. You have guards at your door. Will Dan Cameron try to rescue his brother?"

"We'll soon know."

They were face to face, absorbed in each other, and I felt completely excluded. So I went out, hurt by the exclusion. But I looked back once—and it is that one glimpse of them that comes to me now as a bright picture when I am discouraged.

They were two fine people standing side by side, throwing a superb gallantry back at life. Their faces were sober and they were not talking. Well, they were two people who had little use for words—for they had a perfect understanding, they had the simplicity of faith.

I walked down the street, once more in the whirlpool of excitement. I stopped by the courthouse steps, but a G.A.R. man said, "This is no place for you," and so I crossed to the south side of St. Vrain and started home.

Dolliver was under the board awning of the Beauty Belle, speaking to a man who stood still and very attentive. Dolliver's hand closed into a solid fist and he said something that sent the man immediately away; then Dolliver went into the saloon with a ponderous swing of his shoulders and one sidewise glance that raked the street.

When I came up the doors were just swinging and I saw the flash of mirrors and crystal chandeliers; there was a crowd in the Beauty Belle and a great deal of noise. A woman walked toward me, but she crossed the street to avoid passing the saloon doors.

That night my father said to me, "I want you to stay off St. Vrain Street tomorrow," and I went to bed and dreamed of Dan Cameron's men riding into New Hope, shooting as they came. The next morning, which was trial day, I ran down to the corner of St. Vrain and Prairie Streets and climbed to the loft of Beekman's warehouse and lay on my stomach, watching the courthouse steps.

I saw crowds there but no violence, though in the evening when Johnny Dix and I went prowling out through the freighters' camp he told me Dan Cameron had ridden into New Hope alone, had vanished down an alley adjoining the Beauty Belle and later had gone away.

I said, "Why wasn't he arrested?"

Johnny said in a mysterious way, "My old man says because Bill Dolliver didn't want him arrested."

The following noon Father came home to dinner looking very pleased. He sat down and said grace and looked across the table to me.

"I want you to remember, when you grow up, that occasionally your father's generation did the right thing. The jury convicted Hale Cameron. He will be hung. Half of the men in that courtroom were trying to intimidate Jeff when he took the stand. But he told his story and, by God, they couldn't scare him!"

"Tod," said my mother, "you swore," and then looked at me.

"It is time," said my father, "for our boy to learn respectable people sometimes swear."

We had a week's calm in our town, but it was a scary calm. For they were

building the scaffold in the park block and its skeleton shape did something to New Hope; it seemed to waken in all of us that latent primitive savagery of which we were so afraid, against which our daily morals so constantly struggled. At night I used to walk by the scaffold and see its gaunt frame against the sky.

They hung him August 10, 1881, with the Phil Sheridan Post guarding the park block against Dan Cameron's raid. No raid came, and Hale Cameron was soon dead. But before he died, and before they put the cap on him, he turned on the platform and looked down to where Big Bill Dolliver stood and he said, so clearly that everybody in the block heard his exact words:

"When you come to hell, Bill, I'll be there to watch you burn."

My father told us this when he came home in the evening. He was speaking to Mother, but I can understand now he wanted me to feel and to see the picture as he saw it, that he wanted to harden me to the brutality of the world I was so fast growing into. I think he had been tremendously hurt when he had made the change from the dreams of youth to the realities of adult life and I think he was determined I should not go through the same disillusionment. Certainly his training shortened my adolescent years and matured me early.

Maybe I lost something; maybe I was cheated out of some of those golden days of boyhood. But at eighteen I was a man—and the education of my father saved me from many mistakes.

Mother was a gentle soul; the harshness of men always frightened her. Yet I remember how she lifted her chin at Father and I remember the anger in her voice. "Then it is Bill Dolliver you ought to hang."

Father shook his head. He said, "You don't understand the rules of the game in our town."

Nor did I then. I was full-grown and had cut my teeth on the bones of goodness and evil and most of the principal characters of my boyhood were dust blended with the shifting prairie soil before I understood either the rules of the game or that inscrutable, sultry-eyed man who walked our streets in silence and knew us so well and scorned us so much. The Beauty Belle made him wealthy and wealth was a strong voice in New Hope, commanding the ears of even our best citizens. Yet the secret of his power lay not in his money, but in the circumstances that set him apart from the rest of us and shut the social door in his face. For, being a saloonkeeper, he stood on that border line between good and evil which our town's conscience insisted on establishing.

My father might drop in for a drink and a word. But the teamsters and the impoverished homesteaders and all those who formed the ragged edge of our life came there too. The Beauty Belle was their lodge and their club and Big Bill Dolliver, understanding them, was their leader. He knew the temper of that reckless, discontented group. He knew its secrets. He knew its lawless element. He was its spokesman and to him came our better citizens when they feared the multitude or when they wanted the votes of the multitude.

Even the outlaws came to Bill. New Hope long had suspected that Bill Dolliver shared the secrets of the Cameron gang, and when Hale Cameron, standing on the gallows platform, had bitterly consigned Bill to hell, that sus-

picion became a certainty. I can understand it now. The Camerons were part of that world over which Bill ruled and therefore, to make his own authority more secure, Big Bill Dolliver trafficked with the Camerons. For he was a man brutally practical in his morals.

I can see him now, swinging his bold shoulders down the street, his heavy-boned cheeks implacably turned to the world, his eyes scorning everything he saw. I think he admired only one thing, which was strength. Any other man New Hope would have horsewhipped and driven from town. But Dolliver walked abroad as indifferent as before while the crosscurrents of speculation and hatred and fear played around him.

Something happened then in our town hard to describe. There was a feeling along St. Vrain Street very strong to me as a youngster, a feeling of breath being held, of some catastrophe hovering over us. All the boys in my gang knew something was about to happen; it was so powerful an influence that we used to sit around the blazing tar barrels south of town, uneasy and afraid to prowl toward the river. And one night Johnny Dix gave it a name.

Johnny said, "Dan Cameron is goin' to kill Jeff McKay. My father heard it."

It is queer how the smell of blood goes with the wind, how the impulse of violence flows along the earth. It was a rumor only, without substance. Yet the following evening, just before supper time, Dan Cameron and five of his men whirled off the prairie into a half-deserted St. Vrain Street and poured a volley into Jeff McKay's small office adjoining Linenweber's restaurant. They were instantly gone, leaving Jeff unhurt behind the desk; but a man just coming out of the restaurant went down with a bullet in the ribs. There was no pursuit.

We were all sitting on the porch, only two hours later, when Jeff and Glory came out of the Harper yard and turned in to our steps. It was dark, but our lamps made a lane down the walk and I could see Jeff McKay's face clearly. I recall now that something had happened to his expression. It was the same, yet his features seemed to stand out and there was a thin line at the corners of his mouth. Trouble hadn't broken him; it had toughened him.

"Has Sheriff Carrigan got a posse out?" asked my father.

"He wants a warrant to follow," said Jeff quietly. "I will not swear one."

"He needs no warrant," said my father. But afterward he added, "I understand why he wants an excuse to chase the Cameron gang. You're a marked man, Jeff."

"It's my quarrel. I don't wish a posse to go out and get shot up for me."

My father was long silent. Then he said, "It could be done simpler than that. The key to this situation, I think, is in one man's pocket. Go see Bill Dolliver."

"I can't do that," said Jeff.

My father stirred in his chair. I remember the quick bright glow of his cigar tip and the smell of its smoke. "I believe I told you a month ago that your conscience was a luxury."

"It is the only thing I have to go by," Jeff McKay said, and turned away with Glory.

I watched them stroll into the darkness side by side and without talk. They made tall silhouettes against the shadows; and something of that deep

faith they both possessed seemed to remain behind on the porch, seemed to quiet the evening.

My father rose. He said, "Come with me," and we went out and crossed to St. Vrain and turned toward the center of town. House lamps made golden lanes all along the way and there was a bright-splashed pool of light in front of the Beauty Belle. My father spoke to me.

"It is hard sometimes to know the difference between right and wrong. A man should be slow coming to judgment."

When we got abreast the Beauty Belle I saw Dolliver standing beside one of the awning posts, smoking a cigar. He looked around as Father came up.

He said, "Hello, Tod."

It was, for him, very civilly said. Father was a little-speaking man, but there was a quality in him. I think Dolliver respected it.

Father said, "Jeff McKay will be dead before the week is out."

Dolliver only looked at him. His cigar tilted upward and his mouth thinned and disappeared beneath the sweep of his black mustache. I felt the power of those big, impatient eyes strike my father, and I hated Dolliver again. But my father's tone was even. I was, I recall, suddenly very proud of him.

"You haven't done enough, Bill."

Dolliver said, "I have done nothing at all, Tod."

But my father's voice was sharper than usual. "I disagree. You had power enough to save Hale Cameron from the rope. But you let him hang. It was a deliberate choice on your part. New Hope doesn't understand why. I do. When you let Hale take his punishment you were backing up Jeff McKay. But it isn't enough."

The words came growling out of Dolliver's throat. "I am no reformer."

"No," agreed my father, dryly, "you are not. Nevertheless you stepped out of the part you have been playing in this town when you refused to protect Hale. I can see no other motive than a desire to give Jeff a chance. Yet the result is that you've ruined your own influence over the Cameron gang and made McKay's death as certain as the coming of night." Afterward he added very softly, "It is the penalty for allowing a kind instinct to get the best of you, Bill. The situation is worse than it was."

"It may be," said Dolliver.

I understood so little of that talk then, yet every word made an indelible scratch on my memory and every fragment of the picture remains clear. Dolliver seemed to grow more and more surly, his eyes showed greater restlessness. My father stood very straight and very certain there in the bright glow of the Beauty Belle; he was always rather handsome, with the small bitterness of unrealized ambitions whetting the edge of his words.

"You have always played your own game," he said. "It was not like you to step aside to support Jeff's game. If you meant it as a kindness it is not enough. As long as Dan Cameron is alive there is no hope for Jeff. It is not only Jeff. There's Glory Harper to be considered."

Dolliver's head came forward. "I heard she was going to marry him."

"That's right."

"He has courage," said Dolliver. "I admire courage." Then he was growling again. "Someday he'll have to learn to temper his high Scotch principles

with a few practical considerations. This is a hard world for principles, Tod. I've never been able to afford them."

That was all. He turned on his heels and swung into the Beauty Belle and Father and I went slowly down St. Vrain, toward home. My father walked with his head bowed and his hands locked behind. Something in his silence impressed me and I did not venture to speak.

A fine, full moon floated low on the horizon and the deep dust of our street was shining like flaked silver. Jeff and Glory were returning from the far shadows, their steps echoing rhythmically together. At our gate Father stopped and stared at them, and he put his hand on the gatepost and swung his glance to me.

He said in a queer way, "Don't be afraid of anything and never be too quick to judge people."

We went on into the house and presently I climbed the stairs to bed. Not long after, before I had fallen asleep, I heard voices outside and I sat up and looked through the window. Dolliver had driven up in a buggy and was speaking to my father, who stood at the edge of the walk.

The moonlight made our street very clear and lovely that night and I could even see the details of Big Bill Dolliver's face as he bent down from his buggy seat. I do not know what he said, but my father extended his hand and they shook and then Dolliver drove away westward at a spanking pace, lifting the quick dust behind.

It is queer how sensitive youngsters are to voice inflections, how quick they can read meaning into simple tone; when my mother called up the stairs next morning I knew something had happened merely from the way she spoke my name. It made me dress rapidly—for in New Hope all of us lived hungrily on the hope of the unexpected—and go down.

My father was already at the table, his face extraordinarily dark, clearly sad. He said grace more solemnly than usual, and then looked over the table at me.

He said, "I think you should know, Sonny, that Dolliver rode out to Camp Creek last night and shot Dan Cameron through the heart. A Cameron man killed him before he could get away. The news came from Harriman's ranch a few hours ago."

My mother had hated Dolliver, but the gentleness in her soul nevertheless grieved. She sat with her hands folded and I heard her murmur, "God be merciful to him."

"It is the end of the gang," my father said. "Hale was the brains of it and Dan the whip. With both of them dead the rest will run to other parts. Jeff is safe enough now."

"He was a wicked man," my mother said, thinking of Dolliver.

But my father got quickly up from the table and shook his head. "I'm not altogether sure."

Well, it was a shock that literally ran from one end of St. Vrain Street to the other. I do not think New Hope quite realized how central a figure this inscrutable, massive, and savage-tempered man had been until it saw the black hearse carry him out to the cemetery on Locust Hill.

It was a story that never died in our town as long as I was there. And it was a story that had the sort of moral New Hope liked. Big Bill had been a silent partner of the Camerons.

But he had fallen out with them over some thieves' quarrel and he had died. Once or twice I was with my father when somebody dwelt on this oft-repeated tale, and I noticed how quietly and sadly he listened to it, saying nothing.

It was a month or two later, I recall, that Jeff McKay and Glory were married. He had built a house on the western edge, one of the finest in our town at that day, and the ceremony was held there. Everybody knew the Harpers were comfortably fixed, but it was nevertheless a surprise when they presented Glory with a ten-thousand-dollar check drawn on an Omaha bank, which Harper explained was part of her people's estate long held for her. And it was also a surprise to the town when Harper, who had never worked, took a job as bookkeeper in the brewery. I remember his telling us the reason for that:

"Raising Glory has been our only business for fifteen years. It's lonesome, losing a job like that. So I got another."

There is but one other thing to tell, and this I did not learn until many years later in the Farther West. My father was growing old and the memories of New Hope were increasingly dear to him. We fell to talking about the town one night.

"As to Dolliver," he said, "New Hope was only half right. He was a power there, and he had no illusions. He stood halfway between the good folks and the rough ones—and he controlled the town because he controlled the rough ones. To hold his power he wouldn't hesitate a minute to drive a bargain with men like the Camerons. I believe he went so far as to keep some of their money they stole in his saloon safe. When he fell out with them it wasn't over money. It was over Hale, whom he let die in order to protect Jeff. So he deliberately went out to kill Dan, well realizing he had little chance to get away alive. But it was Jeff and Glory he was thinking about when he drove out to Camp Creek in his buggy."

I said, "Why? It doesn't sound like Dolliver."

My father said, "I was one of the men appointed by the court to open the Beauty Belle safe after he was killed. We didn't find a dime of money in it, though he was supposed to have been wealthy. There wasn't anything in it, except one paper. That was a birth certificate. There were four of us on the committee. After we looked at the birth certificate we destroyed it and swore never to mention it. Bill had supported the Harpers for years. It was his ten thousand that they passed on to Glory. She knew nothing about that. She knew nothing about him at all."

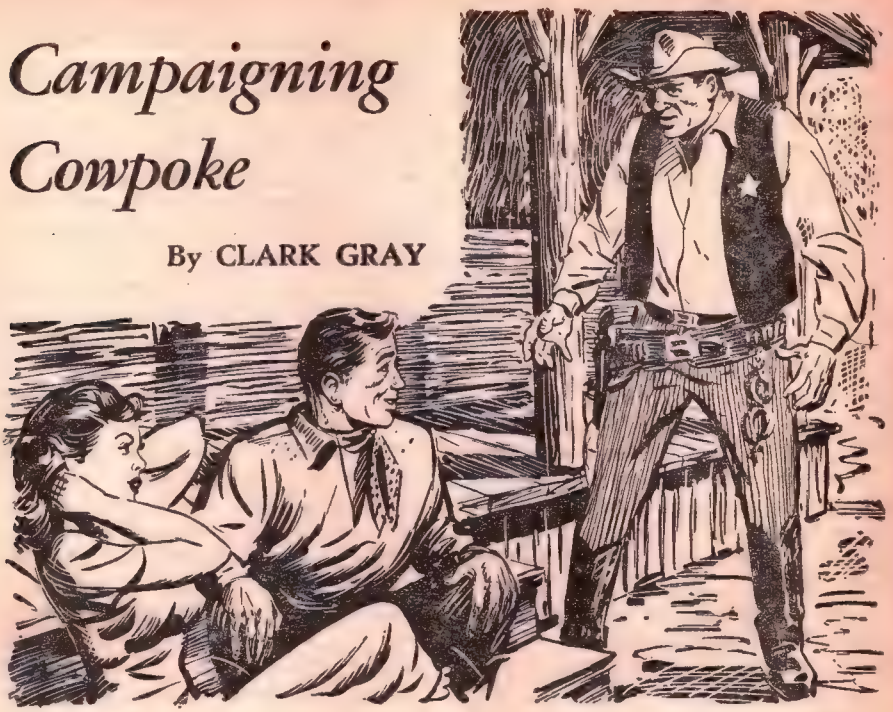
My father was a man who hated to display his emotions. But that night I noticed how strong were the feelings beneath his customary reserve.

"You see," he added, "Bill Dolliver was Glory's father. But he knew himself too well and he knew the world too well to allow Glory to grow up as his daughter. It is why he chose the Harpers to raise her from childhood, many years before he came to New Hope. She never did know. Well, he was a crook and he had no illusions. But he had no fear, either, and when the time came he played out his hand as he saw it to the complete end, without welshing."

To my father and my father's generation that covered everything.

Campaigning Cowpoke

By CLARK GRAY



A beating up prompts a happy-go-lucky range rider to take a fling at politicking—but he has to join up with a practically non-existent party!

THE two Ferguson boys operated a three-hundred-cow ranch they had inherited from their daddy. The ranch bordered the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle. The entire place was fenced with six wires and cedar posts. Most of the grass was open; the river gave abundant water and wintertime shelter in the breaks. It was a nice lay-out, and the Ferguson boys tended to business and made a nice living.

They were lean and friendly young men. Having been brought up with cattle, they knew how to work their calves at the right time to avoid screw-worm infestation. They gentled their old mother cows and kept their fences up and had the horses as tame as pet dogs. Every year they sold about two hundred thirty weanling calves as stockers to the neighbors. Their cull cows, some forty a year, were thrown in with a larger herd and trailed to the Abilene, Kansas, railhead.

The steady one was Dave. Dave was tall and blond, with brown sober eyes. He had married early, a girl as steady and sober as himself. Already they had two saucer-eyed, unsmiling children. Dave stayed at home and tended the mother cows while Red trail-drove to Abilene.

Red wasn't wild in the sense that he drank or gambled or shot up people. He was no hard case. He was freckled and blue-eyed, with a lithe, well-muscled body. But Red believed that along with work, a man was entitled to his fun.

That was why Red wintered over in Abilene and didn't get back to the home stomping-grounds in Roan till the following June. And that, too, was why Ellie Jones threw Red over.

"Ellie," Dave told Red over the supper table on the day of his arrival home, "has got herself engaged to Sheriff Tom Blake. What in blazes kept you so long, Red?"

Red stuffed a forkful of fried round steak into his mouth and grinned. He had a grin that could charm the ears off a sow.

"Ever been in Abilene in wintertime, Dave? The floating population's all gone then. Only the gamblers and the barkeeps left. And the girls." He winked. "I got myself a job in a feed store and spent the winter making friends."

Dave shook his head and sighed. "You've lost Ellie while you've been tomcatting around. You can't expect a girl like that to wait forever, Red. And you won't get her back. Tom Blake will make trouble if you try."

"Tom Blake," Red opined, "is too old for Ellie. And too fat. Ellie wouldn't like a lazy husband, Dave."

Dave shrugged. His sober eyes had a faraway look, the look of a man weighing his responsibilities. Then he smiled and punched Red affectionately on the arm.

"We've always stuck together, Red. I reckon we always will. I think I know how you feel about Ellie. You let me know how you come out."

Red bought a box of lemon drops at the Roan Mercantile. He got a barbering job, and about eight o'clock he was walking up the boardwalk toward Lawyer Jones's house with his lean shoulders swaying jauntily and his Stetson hat cocked a little to one side. He didn't anticipate any trouble with Ellie, for he had been courting her off and on since they'd been in the eighth grade together. He knew Ellie like an old shoe. Of late he'd caught himself wondering why he didn't marry her and get it over with.

He found Ellie on the front-porch steps and right away he began making up his lost ground. It was a thing Red was good at. Before long he was sitting pretty close to Ellie, there on the step in the moonlight. That was when Sheriff Blake came stalking through the picket gate and up the plank walk.

"Heard you were back in town," Tom Blake greeted. Blake was a paunchy man ten years older than Red and Ellie. He halted before them and put his hands on his hips and scowled. Moonlight carved out the black outline of a holster at his side. It sparked bluely off the handcuffs hanging from his belt. "Get out of here, Red."

Red Ferguson grinned at Ellie. His voice was a trifle cool. "Maybe he thinks I'm his dog."

"Get moving," Tom Blake said. "Ellie's engaged to me."

Red unwound his lean body and came slowly to his feet, still grinning.

He said, "Now, Tom, I came here on a friendly visit. I reckon it's up to Ellie to tell me when to leave."

"All right." Tom Blake turned gruffly to Ellie. "Tell him to scat, hon!"

Ellie Jones's pretty face turned from one man to the other. She was a small, dark girl dressed in white. She touched

her hair with a dainty hand, an instinctively feminine gesture, Red thought. Now, being a lawyer's daughter, Ellie had been very properly brought up. She knew how to cook and sew and keep household accounts, which was the correct field of knowledge for a nice young girl. But it appeared to Red that she was not above a little feminine enjoyment of this kind of thing. She smiled sweetly and impartially.

"You're my guests." Her voice had a silky touch of command, and she patted the porch step on either side. "Sit down, both of you."

Stubbornly Tom Blake shook his head. He was a big man with a one-track mind. "I ain't going to do it. I came here to visit my future wife, not to listen to some jakeleg cowpuncher." He glowered at Red. "I got a notion to teach you some manners, bucko."

Red Ferguson shifted a little on his feet. He was still smiling; his mop of hair was a little mussed in the moonlight. He had known he'd have to make this decision about Tom Blake sooner or later. Cheerfully he made it now.

"It ain't polite to refuse that kind of invite, is it, Tom? Leave your gun with Ellie."

He heard Ellie suck in her breath sharply, but he ignored it. Turning, he stalked around the house and out the gate into the alley. He heard Tom Blake's gruff voice as the sheriff ordered Ellie into the house. Presently Blake joined him in the alley. Blake's big shoulders looked blocky as hams in the shifting light of the alley.

"Bucko," he said, "I'm going to cut your face up so you won't want to see Ellie for a while."

"Come ahead," Red said, and when Tom Blake charged Red hit him in his soft stomach, burying his fist to the wrist.

He heard Blake's grunt of dismay; then Blake half spun away and Red saw him grasping for something at his belt. Red thought of the handcuffs, but he didn't believe it. Then he couldn't help but believe it, for he caught the shine of them as Blake got them free and hefted them to strike.

Red ducked, but not far enough. The slashing cuffs caught him on the back of the neck, driving him to his knees and flinging an array of gaudy lights across his vision. He tried to get up, and he sensed that Tom Blake was striking again with the steel cuffs. . . .

He awoke on an iron cot, in a barred cell. He came erect, groaning, feeling pain in his face. He prodded gingerly at his nose, and there was a deep cut there. Then a shadow fell across him.

"Come on," a voice said.

Red looked up to see Tom Blake standing outside the bars. Blake was freshly shaved; he was smoking a cigar.

Red said wryly, "You meant it, didn't you—about cutting me up?"

"Come on," Tom Blake said. "I want to see you in my office."

Red got up painfully and followed Blake through the cell door, down the corridor. A half-dozen deputies loafed outside Blake's office. They stared curiously, but at Blake's curt words of dismissal they drifted off. Inside the office Blake sank into a swivel chair and put his spurred boots on top of his desk.

"Set," Blake said.

Red Ferguson sat. He took note of a few things. The deputies, for instance, who had been loafing in the corridor. The bagged canvas seat of Blake's swivel chair. The long scratch marks

on Blake's desk where the sheriff had raked his spurs. The foul scent of stale cigars that filled the room.

Red said, "You must spend a lot of time here."

Tom Blake knocked cigar ash on the floor. "Red, I could book you for disturbing the peace. I ain't going to do it—this time. But you'll have to behave from here on out. Understand?"

Red said, "I understand all right, Tom. I never knew you was afraid of competition."

"I ain't." Tom Blake grinned around his cigar. "I know how to handle it."

Red Ferguson touched his chin. There was another cut place there, where the cuffs had struck him after he had lost consciousness.

"You sure do— Tom, ain't there an election this fall?"

Blake's eyes narrowed. "What about it?"

Red Ferguson tried a tentative smile. It hurt his mouth, but he kept on smiling anyway. He said, "I don't think you do enough work, Tom. You set there in that swivel chair and smoke cigars and let your deputies run around on your chores. And you've got twice as many deputies as any sheriff in Roan ever had before. That ain't good. Costs the county too much."

He turned and went out, leaving Tom Blake staring at him. He got his horse and rode home.

Dave was shoeing a pony in the cattle pens when Red rode by on the way to the house. Red didn't stop, but he saw Dave lower the pony's forefoot to wave, saw Dave's mouth drop open at the sight of his cut-up face. At the house Red went to his room and began to sponge the dried blood from his face with a wet towel.

Dave came in. Red saw that his brother's face was dark with anger. Dave had gone to his own room and got a gun. The gun strapped at Dave's lean hip did not look natural there.

"Who did it?" Dave said.

Red looked at Dave over the towel without speaking for a moment. He dabbed cautiously at his eye. Dave asked harshly:

"Was it Blake?"

Red put down the towel. "Dave, it was Blake. But I'll square this in my own way. I'm going to run for sheriff."

Dave sat down heavily on the bed. He shook his head. He glanced up at Red and studied him as if he were a queer species of critter, then shook his head again. For the first time Red noticed with a pang that Dave really looked like an older brother, with the worried eyes, the little lines of age on his cheek, everything.

Dave said, "That's a damned crazy thing to do!"

Red nodded. "Would you rather I'd take after him with a gun?"

"But suppose you win?" Dave protested. "You might actually get elected."

"I damned well aim to get elected."

Dave got up and walked to the window, hands behind his back. Red poked at his face with the towel and watched Dave's hands clasp and unclasp, and he was sorry that he'd had to upset Dave.

"Red, I'll be glad when you marry Ellie and settle down," Dave said wearily.

"One thing at a time, Dave. When's the closing date for filing?"

"Couple days." Dave sighed. "You won't have much time to campaign. The primary's less than a month off."

"Then I won't meet him in the primary. I'll file on the Republican ticket.

That way I can have till November to beat him."

"The Republican ticket!" Dave turned and looked at Red, and he began to laugh. "Boy, you been in Abilene too long. This here is Texas. You couldn't get elected flea-scratcher on the Republican ticket."

Red grinned, not minding it when Dave laughed at him. "You watch me."

Dave said, "I'll watch you, all right, Red. But hell, I kind of hate to vote Republican myself, even for you. It just ain't the custom in Texas." Thoughtfully he knuckled his blond head. "Look, you go see Phineas Jones, Ellie's dad. He's a Republican, if I remember right—the only man I ever heard own up to it. Go see what he says."

Red did go to see Phineas Jones. He found him in his office, a starchy, prunelike little man with a stiff white collar. Jones became somewhat wistful when Red stated his business.

"I wish I could advise you to run on our ticket, Red. But the fact is you'd never live it down. People would laugh at you the rest of your life. Not that I wouldn't like to see you run, mind! I'm only thinking of your own good."

Red said, "How do I get on the ticket?"

"Hell, I can take care of that for you. There's not even enough Republicans in the county to fill out the slate. If you want the sheriff's nomination, all you got to do is say so."

"Will you help me campaign?"

"Sure." An eager light replaced the wistfulness in Phineas Jones's face. "I'll figure the issues for you. How do you feel about the tariff, Red? And you're for hard money, I take it?"

"I don't know if I'm for hard money or not," Red said. "I thought all money was hard, except paper money. I don't know about such things, Mr. Jones. All I know is that Tom Blake is a Democrat. That makes me a Republican."

Phineas Jones sighed. "I guess that's as good a reason as most folks have. All right, Red. I'll get you filed. You'll begin to campaign next week."

Red found out about campaigning, and he didn't like the things he found out. He had thought vaguely about making speeches, about getting his picture in the Roan *Weekly Gazette*. But Phineas Jones laughed wryly at those ideas.

"The way to campaign," Jones said, "is to go talk in person to every qualified voter in the county. Back him in a corner and argue with him. Convince him you're the man for the job."

Red blinked his dismay. "All of 'em! There must be hundreds!"

"Two thousand three hundred and forty-two," Jones said. "I can cross a couple hundred party regulars off the list, because they'd vote Democratic if the devil himself was a candidate." Phineas Jones sighed. "I wish there was some Republicans like that in Texas."

Red grinned. "What'll I tell the others?"

"I'll work it out for you. But remember this, son. It ain't so much what you say as it is the way you say it. You got to turn on the personality. You got to shine." Phineas Jones turned to spit into a big brass cuspidor, and he did not look happy.

Red spent the next few days in Phineas Jones's office, memorizing the gist of what Jones wrote out for him on long legal sheets of paper. The

duties of a county sheriff, his own qualifications, the aspects in which Tom Blake had failed to do a good job. Phineas Jones even went out and did a little snooping for him at the courthouse and the bank, and he came back with some facts that made Red grunt in surprise. Red copied down the facts with grim pleasure.

The Sunday night before he was to start campaigning he went to see Ellie with a handful of roses from the picket fence around the home ranch.

Ellie came to the door with a smile. The smile disappeared and her eyes darkened when she recognized him.

"You came to see Father?"

Red shook his head and extended the roses with a grin. "I came to see you, Ellie. Can I come in?"

She bit her lip and stared a long moment at the half-healed cuts on his face. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Red! Why did you have to pull a gun on Tom?"

Red lost his grip on the roses and almost dropped them. "Why did I what?" His voice was harsh.

"Pull that derringer out of your hat? Tom wouldn't have hurt you like that if you'd fought fair."

Red said grittily, "Tom told you I pulled a derringer?"

She nodded in silent misery. "He had to tell me, Red. He didn't want me to think he'd used the cuffs on you without cause."

Red felt a sudden sharp pain in his hand; he realized he was gripping the roses so tightly a thorn had pierced his thumb. He said gently, "And you believe him?"

"Of course." There was a kind of pride in the erectness of her shoulders. "Tom may have his faults, Red. But lying isn't one of them."

"Isn't it?" Red took the roses and separated them in his hands, staring at them without seeing them, sorting his bitter thoughts. At length he sighed.

"Ellie, you're a nice girl, and you think nice things about people. But you don't know the truth about Tom Blake. I hope I can show you the truth before you marry him."

Red began to campaign next morning. He strapped his warbag behind his saddle and rode toward the far end of the county, stopping at every farmhouse on his way. To every voter he told his story.

Tom Blake, Red said grimly, had fifteen deputies on the county pay roll. Never in the history of Roan County had any sheriff before Blake hired more than seven. What did those extra eight deputies do? Red asked. He left it to the voter to remember the way those deputies hung around the courthouse.

And where, Red argued, did Tom Blake get the money in his bank account? Red pulled out the figures Phineas Jones had given him and read them off. A bank account of five thousand dollars. A new house in town that cost three thousand if it cost a nickel. A ranch south of Roan. Blake had acquired these things since he had become sheriff. Could it be that Blake was taking kickbacks from his deputies?

These were telling arguments, because they were true. It was also true, Red suspected, that too many drunks had been rolled in Roan saloons lately. But he had no proof of that.

Sometimes Red got a promise of votes. More often the man would say:

"Maybeso, Mister. But my pappy

and grandpappy would turn over in their graves if I voted for a Republican."

Red would grin then. "Don't you believe in voting for the best man?"

"Sure," the voter would answer. "But if he was a Republican, how could he *be* the best?"

Red stayed out for a month in that section of the county, seeing some eight hundred voters. He grew gaunt with the constant travel and the irregular hours. His stomach became upset now and then from eating strange food, and he found it a little harder to maintain his cheerful grin. It was late July when he got back into Roan to find that he had been right about the drunks.

"It's been a regular crime wave," Phineas Jones reported. "A man don't dare take more'n three drinks or he wakes up in the alley with his pockets empty. It's hard to prove it on Tom Blake's deputies, but they're always hanging around."

"Do you suppose," Red said, "that those deputies are kicking back part of that to Blake?"

"Hell, yes, I suppose it," Phineas Jones snapped peevishly. "Rolling drunks is a crime, ain't it? How else would them deputies get away with it without Blake's knowledge and permission? And Blake wouldn't give that permission without a good reason. And money is a damned good reason."

Red said, "How's Blake taking the campaign?"

Phineas Jones looked embarrassed. "He's laughing like hell, Red. He thinks it's funny to have a Republican running against him. Matter of fact, I think that's another reason why he's letting his deputies roll so many drunks. It's sort of a taunt, you might say. But he could go too far. If we could only get some proof about those kickbacks—"

"How's Ellie?" Red asked.

Phineas Jones took out a stubby pipe and stuffed it with slender old fingers. "Red, you know the girl as well as I do, maybe better. She got engaged to Blake while you was prowlin' around Abilene. It might have been to show you she was independent—I don't know. Anyway, she's got her pride up now, and neither you nor I can help her there."

Red said, "All right. I'll head south next week."

He spent three days helping Dave cut out and sell some two hundred weanling calves. He found that Dave, too, knew about the drunks.

"Them deputies," Dave said, "ain't Texas boys, Red. You can tell by listening to 'em talk. There's a different accent for every man of 'em."

Red grinned. "It ain't polite to listen to a man's accent, Dave. Some folks are kind of shy about letting on where they come from."

"That's what I was getting at." Dave's usually placid face was lined with worry. "Red, did you ever stop to think about where Tom Blake gets his deputies?"

Red looked up at Dave sharply. He said, "No, Dave, I never did think about it. But I'm thinking about it now." He slapped Dave on the shoulder with the flat of his hand. "You ain't as simple as you look, son."

Red rode south and spent two more months campaigning. He found that the temper of the populace was changing. News of the goings-on in Roan had spread out into the rural areas, where Tom Blake's vote-getting strength was greatest, among the

church-going, God-fearing people.

"I can't figure it," one leather-faced old cattleman told Red. "Tom Blake's a religious man. Him and me are deacons in the same church. I can't believe he's a part of this small-time skulduggery. But if he ain't, how come nobody's been arrested?"

Red Ferguson nodded understandingly. "Most politicians put up a front, I reckon. Tom Blake is a deacon because it gets him votes. But pretending to be pure don't change the actual smell of a man, does it?" His young jaw hardened. "You'll see an honest job done, if I'm elected."

He began to feel that he was making progress after that. Not much, but a little. Tom Blake, he decided, wasn't playing his cards close enough to his vest. Blake was overconfident, counting too much on a solid Democratic vote.

The feeling grew as the weeks passed and the first frosts of October put a chill in the clear morning air. Voters talked a little less of party loyalty now. They began to ask more pointed questions about Tom Blake. Some of the questions Red couldn't answer, for he had no absolute proof. If he only had proof— The thought sent him into deep concentration one night as he sat beside his lonely campfire with his back propped against his saddle.

Next day Red reached the little railroad community of Blackbird, in the south end of the county. There he went to the brick railroad station. He wrote two telegrams. The first read:

Sheriff Tom Blake, Roan, Texas.

Your list and description of Roan County deputies received. Incomplete investigation shows rewards outstanding for at least six of your men. Will arrive Roan to make necessary arrests within few days. Your claim to rewards on these men acknowledged.—TIM O'SHANTER, *Texas Ranger.*

Red kept a copy of the telegram and gave another copy to the station agent for immediate dispatch. Then, grinning, he reread his second telegram:

Sheriff Tom Blake, Roan, Texas.
Arriving Roan today on 3:22 northbound.—O'SHANTER.

Red gave his second telegram to the station agent. "Keep this one till you hear from me, will you, Mister?"

The station agent was a burly man with one ear half shot away. His lips moved as he read the second telegram.

"And keep your mouth shut," Red added. "This here is confidential business."

The agent folded the second telegram and put it carefully in his pocket. His mouth was grim. "I come from Kansas, Ferguson. A Mississippi Democrat shot off this ear during the war. Anything else you need?"

Red's blue eyes crinkled in a sympathetic smile. Then he nodded. "You might ask the agent in Roan to see that one of Blake's deputies gets hold of this first telegram. Accidental-like, you know. Can you trust him to do that?"

"I reckon. He's my son."

Red grinned and paid the man. He left Blackbird at a gallop, heading directly home.

He arrived in town shortly after noon next day. As he crossed the tracks and turned his pony's nose toward the business district, he heard a gunshot. The figure of a big man cut through the cottonwoods and across the sandy

street three blocks ahead at a dead run. Sunlight flashed from the handcuffs at the figure's belt.

Red Ferguson saw the running man duck into Phineas Jones's office building, and he grinned and swung his pony around toward the railroad station. The action had started a little quicker than he'd figured. Dismounting, he spoke quickly to the youth behind the counter.

"Get in touch with your pa. Have him send on that other telegram to Blake. When it comes through, you deliver it yourself to Phineas Jones's office, pronto. Got it?"

The youngster nodded solemnly. His eyes were big with excitement and curiosity, but Red had no time for explanations now. He ran back to his pony at a lope.

By the time Red had reached Phineas Jones's office building, the deputies had gathered. They stood in the middle of the street under the cottonwoods, all fifteen of them. Fifteen dark-faced men, some tall, some short and fat, some light and some dark, but all alike in the guns they wore and in the grim determination in their eyes. Red halted before them.

"Tom Blake around?"

The tallest of the deputies nodded. "Up in Jones's office."

Red took a look around. The street seemed empty, but it wasn't. There were faces peering out of windows and around doors and behind blinds all up and down Main Street, from the mercantile and the barbershop and the saloon and the blacksmithy and the bank.

Red lit a cigarette and puffed out the match. "Something wrong, boys?"

The tall deputy shook his head. "You go up and find Blake, Ferguson. Tell him we want to see him."

"What about?"

"That," the tall deputy answered coolly, "is private. But you tell Blake it won't be private long, if he don't come out."

Red shrugged. "Okay, boys." He moved to the hitchrack and dismounted and went up the stairway to Phineas Jones's office.

He found Phineas seated in his swivel chair, with Tom Blake standing over him. Phineas's mouth was opening and closing soundlessly; he was very pale. Tom Blake was talking, his big voice booming through the room, which was why he hadn't heard Red's entry. Blake's gun was on his hip.

"You started it," Blake was roaring. "You and that damned redheaded cowpuncher, with that fake telegram. Now end it!"

Red grinned and tiptoed across the room and lifted Blake's gun from holster. He flipped the gun to Phineas Jones as Blake whirled with a startled oath. Phineas caught the gun skillfully and turned it on Blake, and a little color returned to his prunelike face.

Red said, "A little trouble with the boys, Tom?"

Blake licked his lips. He lifted his right hand to the handcuffs in his belt, then after a thoughtful moment dropped it.

"Damn you to hell, Ferguson! One of my deputies took a shot at me!"

Red grinned. "Lucky I got back to town. I'll fix everything for you, Tom."

Still grinning, he went to the window. Outside he saw that the deputies had scattered a little, behind the shelter of the horse trough and the cottonwoods in the middle of the street. The boy from the railroad station was coming up the boardwalk with a yellow envelope in his hand now.

Red spotted the tall deputy staring at him from the mercantile porch. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted:

"Blake claims you boys owe him some money. Says he only wants to collect what's coming to him."

He heard Tom Blake's inarticulate curse, but he ignored that. He watched the bafflement, and then the anger, twist the gaunt face of the deputy.

"That dirty lying son!" the deputy shouted hoarsely. "That cooks him with me, Ferguson. I won't cover up for him no more. I paid him ten-percent of my salary, and so did the rest of the boys. When that wasn't enough, we went out in the alleys and got more. Send the penny-pinchin' coyote down, or by Ned, we're comin' after him!"

The sigh that came up from the town then was plainly audible. Behind the doors and windows and curtains voices spoke excitedly to one another. Out of the corner of his eye Red saw Ty Corbett, the newspaper editor, break from the bank and run at a crouch across the street toward the office of the Roan *Weekly Gazette*.

At that moment there came a knock on Phineas Jones's door, and Red turned to see Tom Blake sputtering helplessly under the gun in Jones's gnarled hand. Jones himself was scratching his head in pop-eyed bewilderment.

"Red, I don't savvy how you done it! Or how you're going to keep Blake from getting killed!"

"You will, Phineas." Red went to the door and took the telegram the youth handed him. He read it aloud.

"*Arriving Roan today on 3:22 northbound.—O'Shanter.*"

Grinning, Red crumpled the telegram and tossed it out the window. He watched the wind catch the yellow paper as it fell past the cottonwoods to strike on the far side of the street. There was a little scuffle in the sand over there; one of the deputies made a dive for the telegram and got it and ran quickly back behind the horse trough.

Red turned to Phineas. "How's Ellie?"

Phineas Jones's eyes were brooding. He shook his head with a sigh. "All right. She broke it off with Blake, here, a couple days ago. Confound it, Red, I don't know what in blazes you've done, but—"

"I've done nothing," Red said, "but send a couple innocent telegrams from a man that doesn't exist." He grinned. "You know, Phineas, it's a funny thing about snakes. Snakes don't trust each other. Every snake among 'em thinks that the other snakes are going to act like snakes." He eyed Tom Blake gravely. "Ain't it so, Tom?"

He moved to the window before Tom Blake could answer. Down in the street he saw the group of deputies clustered around the tall one, who had the wrinkled telegram in his hand. They were conferring excitedly, arguing. A moment later they separated, and as Red Ferguson faced back toward the room, he heard the rapid beat of galloping hoofs heading out of town.

Red wasn't smiling now as he advanced toward Tom Blake. Being an easy-going, soft-hearted young man, he felt a little sorry for Blake. But he didn't let that sorrow change his mind.

"Tom," he said, "I reckon you know this finishes you here. Everybody in Roan heard that deputy admit kicking back part of his salary to you. I'm going to boot you out of town, Tom."

Tom Blake's cheeks seemed to cave in. But the man still had bluster. "You

can't run me out of town, Ferguson. Just because a lying deputy spouts some crazy tale—"

"We could call a grand jury," Red interrupted calmly. "We could let them decide whether the deputy was lying. Take your choice, Tom. A penitentiary sentence—or leave town."

Tom Blake's heavy face was mottled with red splotches. But his eyes darkened with defeat, and he dropped his glance, and his voice, when he spoke, was sullen.

"My property?"

"I'll sell it at a sheriff's sale," Red said. "And send you the money."

Nobody was on the street when Red and Tom Blake came out of Phineas Jones's office and crossed toward the courthouse, where Blake's horse stood at the hitchrail. But Red knew that the eyes behind the doors and windows and curtains were still there. He could feel them, and he had no doubt from the rigid whiteness of Tom Blake's face that Blake felt them, too. Blake walked with his eyes straight ahead and unseeing, like a man walking toward the gallows.

Red waited gravely until Tom Blake got into his saddle. Then he said:

"I think you'd be happier outside of Texas, Tom."

Tom Blake nodded bitterly. His lips made a thin, bloodless line. He turned his horse and rode out of town.

The election went off very smoothly. It was true that Blake's name was still on the ballot, but Blake was no longer a resident of Roan County, and everybody knew it. Of eighteen hundred thirty-two votes cast, Red Ferguson received eighteen hundred thirty-two.

Phineas Jones became wildly enthusiastic. "We had to disgrace a Democrat to do it," he said, waving his pipe, "but we finally elected a Republican in Texas! This is the beginning, boy! With you in office we can build an organization now. Someday we'll put Texas in the marching columns of the Grand Old Party, and you and I will be responsible. Don't that make you feel proud, boy? Think of being the father of all those good Republicans!"

Red Ferguson grinned. "I don't want to be the father of a whole stateful of Republicans, Mr. Jones. Ellie says she only wants to have three."

CARSON'S BEST HUNT

ONE of the little-known feats of Kit Carson's life consisted of killing one more buffalo than he had balls for his Hawken rifle. It happened when Carson was meat hunting for Bent's Fort on the Arkansas, the great citadel of the Plains. It came about because of a wager that Carson couldn't kill a buffalo with each of six balls. He took it.

The six balls and powder charges were counted out, Carson was thoroughly searched to prevent any hidden resources, and away he went, followed by the skinners in a wagon. In due course, the wagon came back with the choice cuts and the hides off seven buffalo. Going easy on his powder, Kit had killed six for six; then, finding he had powder left, he cut the ball out of his last kill, poured the powder down the barrel, spat the ball down behind it, and "throwed another one in his tracks."

—OLD HUTCH

COWBOYS FOR SURE!

A Poem

By S. OMAR BARKER

TO RIDE the high mesa and ride the low plain!
Ride out in the sunshine and out in the rain,
And where you find cattle there ain't any doubt
But what there's a cowpuncher somewheres about!

He may ride a sorrel, he may ride a paint,
He may not be purty, 'cause some punchers ain't,
But if you look close, you will notice, my friend,
That he rides with his face toward the horse's front end!

And when the horse gallops you'll see at a glance
That the seat of the saddle is glued to his pants;
And when he ropes dogies you'll note that his trust
Is all put in God and a cinch that won't bust!

His chaps are of leather, his spurs are of steel,
His horse is his four-legged automobile,
And if he's a cowpoke he'd rather be dead
Than ridin' out there with no hat on his head!

Go ride where it's open, go ride where it's thick!
Go ask some old cowpuncher what makes him tick!
He'll tell you that one way to keep out of jail
Is spend all your life lookin' cows in the tail!

Oh, ride the lone prairies and ride the blue hills!
You'll find them ol' cowpokes don't take many pills!
They prob'ly can't yodel nor play no guitar—
The kind you'll find out where the range cattle are!

An Original ZGWM

Fact Feature

CONQUEROR BREED

By Harold Preece

All-but-forgotten Henry Kinney, "Baron of the Nueces," played a leading part in creating our southwestern empire.

SOME men went to Texas to heal wounds imposed by fortune, and others to avoid wounds that might be inflicted by lawmen. But two came nursing wounds of the heart, and they stayed to blaze empires.

One of these was Sam Houston, who succeeded in grabbing a slice of the foreign-owned Southwest where Aaron Burr had failed. The other was Henry Lawrence Kinney, who might have overshadowed both of them had he stepped on the scene of destiny soon enough. Houston is an epic figure in the story of American conquest. Kinney has been all but forgotten.

Yet the two had much in common, for ambition lashes with the same goad that prodigal breed of the conquerors. Kinney was suave and smooth where Houston was blunt and brusque. But each smarted from galling dreams of power that would hardly brook anybody's authority but his own. Each towered in height; each was recklessly courageous and unwilling to play for earth's small stakes of comfort and content. Each had an irresistible influence over men, from the President of the United States to the lowliest

Indian swapping furs and beeswax for tobacco and calico.

Houston had his Eliza Allen, who drove him in disgrace and despair from his proud position as Governor of Tennessee. Kinney had his Julia Webster, daughter, no less, of the immortal Daniel. Julia's impact on Kinney was no less devastating. Her rejection sent him flying from a thriving business in Illinois to the corpse-haunted wilds of Texas.

Indirectly and unmeaningly, the Webster girl did much for the Lone Star State. Henry Kinney was made for Texas, as Texas was made for men like him. Perhaps, fittingly, his early origins are obscure like many another man who crossed the Sabine River on one excuse or another. A pedigree meant less than a good saddle in that sparsely settled wilderness, a family tree less than a stand of good timber that could be converted into cabins and corrals.

No two historians agree on the year of Henry Kinney's birth, whether in 1813 or 1814. None know which of two Bradford County, Pennsylvania, townships can claim him as native. His father was a lawyer who governed his home as severely as any judge ever ran a court.

Rules made by others were not to young Henry's liking. In that eternal clash of age versus youth, it is youth which must pack up and travel. Saddling his horse and bidding his parents a scant farewell, the seventeen-year-old boy headed west. In Illinois, he signed up in the Black Hawk War to fight against the rebellious Sac and Fox Indians.

It was his baptism of fire, as it was also his first experience with Indians who fought manfully against the invaders. The few pathetic tribelets left in Pennsylvania had barely enough energy to beg the few crusts of bread on which they eked out their days. It was in that campaign, also, that he first became acquainted with men who would go on to shape the future of this turbulent, expanding country.

Kinney's commander was Zachary Taylor, still in his twenties, but already being called, behind his back, "Old Rough and Ready." The runaway boy listened to the frequent quarrels between Taylor and his arch rival, Winfield Scott, but took no sides, as did some of the other men in his outfit. Two officers—Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis—fascinated Kinney as a study in contrasts. Both Kentuckians by birth, one was awkwardly, but proudly, a backwoodsman. The other had the consciously acquired grace of a man to the manor adopted if not to it born. In Lincoln and Davis, the boy felt a subdued but impending clash of deep, never-to-be reconciled opposites.

At night, talk shifted around the campfires to a new country called Texas. Men argued hotly that its bounds lay within the Louisiana Purchase and that demands should be made on the weak Republic of Mexico for its surrender. Others who had made brief trips there described glowingly its great fertile, unclaimed acres and its mammoth herds of majestic wild cattle with horns as long as Indian spears.

Another Kentuckian, Albert Sidney Johnston, expressed that which was in the minds of a great many Americans in that year of 1831. "Americans are crossing the Sabine and settling there," he said. "Sam Houston is bivouacking in Arkansas with the Cherokees till President Jackson gives

him the word to go in and take Texas."

When the Black Hawk War was finished, on terms that were no credit to Andy Jackson, Henry Kinney determined to be in the vanguard of conquest that would help itself to Texas. He saw that promising but untended province of Mexico long before he saw Miss Webster from Boston—even if she was destiny's instrument in settling him there finally.

From the time that he crossed the Sabine, he was stirred by the broad, rolling pampas and high, jagged mountains. He rode over land so fertile that it need be punched only with a stick to grow bumper crops of corn and cotton. He noticed valuable minerals, used only by the Indians to tip arrows, cropping out of the ground. But with all this raw, untouched wealth awaiting the creative hand of man, the politicians in far-off Mexico City spent their time roistering and bullfighting, hardly caring that Texas existed.

Kinney heard harsh criticisms on the lips of the Anglo-American settlers building solid communities in the eastern half of Texas. He listened to expressions of bitter resentment in the Irish settlement of San Patricio (St. Patrick) in the southern tip of the state. Immigrants from Georgia and immigrants from Galway alike were chafing over the Mexican government's failure to build schools and highways. All were fighting-mad over the refusal of that government to admit Texas into the Mexican Union as a full-fledged state, so that its industrious pioneers could themselves take hold and go forward.

"One dictator follows another in Mexico City, but not a peso of our tax money is spent on improvements for a territory filling up with good, hard-working folk." So John McMullen, a founder of the Irish colony, grumbled in the receptive ear of Henry Kinney. McMullen puffed for a minute on his long, clay pipe, then added:

"There's a storm whipping up in Texas, Henry, me lad. And the first clap of thunder will shake this continent."

One spot constantly intrigued Kinney during those restless two or three years when he made the hospitable Irish village his headquarters. That place was shallow Corpus Christi Bay, at the mouth of the Nueces River, not far from San Patricio. The seven feet of water in the bay was hardly enough to float the canoes of the Karankawa Indians desultorily fishing for oysters and shrimp. Innumerable bars in the smaller streams emptying into it further limited navigation.

A rundown ranch village, established by cattle baron Enrique de Villareal, stood near the waterfront. But Villareal spent most of his time playing soldier in distant Matamoras. Texans swore that he aimed a whip more accurately at the back of a hapless peon than a blunderbuss at the side of a barn.

However that might be, Kinney was already viewing the little bay with eyes that saw generations into the future. Scientific dredging machinery could deepen the inlet. Other machines could widen the channel and eliminate the treacherous bars. Texas would then have a major trade outlet through the Gulf of Mexico to all of Latin America. And where the lonesome screech of gulls now sounded over the wretched bayside hamlet, men's ears would be attuned to the sounds of commerce in a flourishing port town.

An ambitious dream for a lad not

yet twenty-one. But the conqueror breed is beset by dreams undying. The bay was always in Kinney's mind; he could still hear its waters lapping lazily but challengingly when he returned to Pennsylvania to be with his dying mother in 1835.

Her death brought about a reconciliation of father and son. Henry begged the older man to move with him to the Southwest. But Texas, with its blood-and-trigger reputation, was outside the ken of Simon Kinney's well-ordered soul. Henry compromised by accompanying his senior to Peru, Illinois, and opening a general store.

Within two years, the boy, still in his twenties, was one of the merchant kings of the big area bounded by the Illinois River. He was one of the first capitalists to interest himself in a tiny but growing town called Chicago, where he acquired substantial interests. He purchased large tracts of land around Peru. Which brought Kinney in contact with Fletcher Webster, currently buying and managing estates for his noted father, Daniel.

Young Kinney and young Webster became bosom friends. When the famous Daniel decided to visit his Illinois property, Kinney headed the welcoming committee which met his party at the steamboat dock. But Henry's hand grew limp in Daniel's when he first saw the lovely Julia walking down the gangplank.

From that moment, the young merchant meant to make the handsome, though icy, New England miss his bride. He hung on her heels, like Lancelot tagging Guinevere, during her few days in his sprawling backwoods village. When Daniel announced his intention of going on to Chicago, Kinney tendered his private carriage with its spanking team of cream-colored horses for the eighty-mile jaunt. Then he stepped inside the vehicle, prepared to squire Miss Julia for the trip.

When they arrived in Chicago, Kinney was the girl's constant escort. Daniel Webster beamed on his courtship. Fletcher, the son, smiled knowingly at his friend's attentions to his pretty sister. Kinney heard wedding bells ringing not too far in the distance when he asked Julia to marry him.

Legend says that she stared at him with frosty New England eyes and replied, "Why no, indeed, I couldn't possibly consider marrying you, Mr. Kinney." In her answer was all the contempt of a settled, established aristocracy for this raw, parvenu one shaping up on the frontier.

Shortly afterward, she went home and wed a chip off Plymouth Rock named Samuel Appleton. Wounded to the core, Kinney sold his store in Peru and his interests in Chicago. Then, a spurned man, he embarked on a grieving, year-long odyssey.

He wandered disconsolately through the old French streets of New Orleans, ignoring the bright-eyed *filles* who might have given him solace for Julia. He fought in Florida's Seminole War under his old friend and commander, Zachary Taylor. Afterward, Kinney tarried in Cuba where the swishing blue waters of Guantanamo Bay reminded him of that haunting little bay in Texas.

And, once again, his ears were ringing with doings in that mutinous province. True to John McMullen's prediction, Texans had struck the blow that rocked the continent. Sam Houston, given the wink from Andy Jackson, had moved in to become president of

a new English-speaking republic, born in blood and fire at the Alamo and Goliad. And Albert Sidney Johnston was one of Sam's high-ranking officers.

Somewhere in his ramblings, Kinney met up with a shrewd Alabaman named William Aubrey, who plied him with eager questions about Texas. Aubrey's willingness to stake money in a partnership whetted Kinney's desire to return to the Lone Star Republic. Texas had been a nation for two years when the pair sailed down the Gulf to open the great trading-post known as Kinney's Ranch on Corpus Christi Bay. Then began one of the most amazing and unique episodes in the history of the West.

The thirty - thousand - square - mile stretch of territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was disputed between Texas and Mexico, with neither country able to hold it. Kinney, at twenty-six, converted the disputed land into his own private buffer state, complete with a flourishing commerce, a standing army, and an elaborate espionage service.

Ignoring the customs collectors of both Texas and Mexico, he hewed out regular trade routes to bring in American goods shipped by shallow craft from New Orleans on the one hand and Mexican wares brought in by pack mules from Matamoras on the other. He acted as a middleman between American and Mexican importers. He sold, at a handsome profit, the goods of both countries to settlers of both races in his personal empire.

He was too astute to assume any official title as ruler. But the settlers called him "Colonel"—the common frontier term of respect for anybody with an extra couple of dollars. Politically, he was in a ticklish situation, liable to be outlawed by both Texan and Mexican authorities as a trespasser and a smuggler. A man with less audacity than Kinney soon would have faced a firing-squad of one or the other republic. But the engaging young trader was able to maintain close and cordial relations with the officials of not only two countries but three.

Leaving the prosaic Aubrey to keep store, he journeyed to Matamoras when he heard that the Mexican commandant, General Mariano Arista, had orders to expel him as an "undesirable alien." He came away from that interview, not only with a revocation of the decree, but with the general's permission to make the first improvements at Corpus Christi. While in the Mexican city, he also made the acquaintance of the American consul, John P. Schatzell. There is good reason to believe that Kinney became the first American intelligence agent on the Texas-Mexican border, and that through his own network of spies he sent Schatzell reports that were later utilized by the United States government in the Mexican War.

Texas President Sam Houston ignored Kinney, rightly fearing him as a possible rival. But Houston's successor, Mirabeau B. Lamar, appointed "the Baron of the Nueces" his special representative "to cultivate friendly negotiations between the Americans on the border and the Mexicans."

Within his own tight domain, Kinney kept peace between his "subjects" of both races and refused to favor one above the other. His army waged impartial warfare against glorified bands of Texas outlaws calling themselves "republican volunteers" and gangs of Mexican robbers calling themselves *comisiones*, organized ostensibly to en-

force customs regulations but actually to plunder Kinney's wagon trains. Schemers, owing allegiance to either Texas or Mexico, soon found that they were left with burned fingers when they laid hands on him.

A rival group of Texas traders, headed by "a fellow named Quinn," got the ear of Texas Vice-President David G. Burnet during one of Lamar's periodic nervous breakdowns, and accused Kinney of conspiring with Arista to march a Mexican army into Texas. Lamar, returning to Austin, the capital, found his unofficial ambassador to Mexico in irons.

Wrathfully, the President ordered Kinney released. Quinn's agents then sped to Matamoras. There they whispered in Arista's ear that Kinney was in league with a Mexican revolutionist, Antonio Canales, currently using the no-man's land as an operations base. Soon, Kinney found himself a prisoner in the rat-infested bastile of the old town, but was shortly rescued in a daring escape engineered by his chief spy, Chapita Sandoval. And not long after, Arista was drinking Henry Kinney's coffee on an amicable visit to Corpus Christi.

Quinn was a flash in the pan compared to more powerful figures who sought to grab Kinney's kingdom. In 1841, Villareal, claiming title to the whole Nueces Valley, marched with two hundred crack Mexican troops to evict "Kinney the usurper." Kinney's garrison at his heavily fortified trading-post amounted to but forty men. Thirty-two of them bolted with a sizable supply of his goods while he was vainly seeking reinforcements from the Texan outpost of Live Oak Point.

The invaders camped three miles from the post. Kinney ordered his remaining eight men to dig trenches and explode land-mine bombs that echoed with a terrific uproar in the ears of the enemy. Thinking that he was facing many more defenders, Villareal sent an envoy with a white flag, offering peace, But the price of peace was the surrender of Kinney's entire stock of merchandise.

"Go back to your captain!" Kinney thundered. "Tell him I'll neither surrender my goods nor myself. I'll fight him to the last. Then I'll lay his bones and those of my command to bleach at my door."

The quaking envoy delivered the message to his master. "What has got into this damned *americano?*" the puzzled Villareal asked. "He must be sure of whipping me, or he wouldn't send such a fierce answer."

The upshot was a personal conference between the two antagonists. For a few thousand dollars, Villareal conveyed all claims to holdings, totaling sixteen thousand square miles, to Kinney. No Texan before or since ever came into a great estate so quickly and so cheaply.

Kinney had immobilized the native Indian tribes in his domain by his friendliness and fair dealing. But the Comanches, swooping down from the northern plains, constantly looted his caravans and slaughtered his drivers.

After a series of raids staged by Chief Satanta with seventeen picked braves, the "Colonel" determined to wipe out the red scourge. Leading eleven of his own men, Kinney overtook the plunderers on a stretch of open prairie. Both sides dismounted for battle. The foxy chief drew the combined fire of the whites by brandishing his buffalo-hide shield. Before Kinney's men could reload, the Co-

manches surged forward.

Kinney alone regained his horse. Caught in the center of the fight, he grabbed a spear from a dying brave. Leaping and lunging, he slew Comanches. Twice arrows pierced his flesh. Once he thought he was finished when an arrow pinned both his sleeves to his jerkin. But as a brave strode forward, tomahawk raised, he broke loose and cracked the Comanche's skull with the butt of his gun.

Three of Kinney's men were dead, all were cruelly wounded. Seven of the fourteen Comanches had been slain when Satanta abruptly ordered his warriors to retreat.

The Comanches stopped harassing the "Colonel's" pack trains. But Kinney never let men remain his enemies when they might become his friends and customers. He made a peace, which lasted, with the fierce tribe. At the first great Texas rodeo, held in San Antonio in 1844, he competed for honors against its best riders. His friend, John McMullen, now a famous Texas Ranger, won first prize in horsemanship, Kinney second, and a Comanche brave third.

Meanwhile, Corpus Christi, the "capital" of Kinney's empire, kept growing as American settlers moved in, attracted by the prosperity he had created. A less statesmanlike figure would have capitalized on the immigration by sewing up a neat little trade monopoly for himself. Kinney not only permitted, but encouraged, competitors to open stores. Meanwhile, he remained the sole wholesaler and principal retailer of the vast region. To attract settlers, he sold land at rock-bottom prices.

The Mexicans became increasingly suspicious of him as *americanos* multiplied on his holdings. It was a relief to him when he could emerge in his true colors as an American patriot when Texas was annexed to the Union in 1845. But, even then, he refused to betray Texans of Mexican descent to the horde waiting to rob them of their homesteads.

He was chosen as the delegate from the Nueces country to the Texas convention called to ratify the annexation treaty with the United States. He took the floor and defeated a proposal to freeze in the state constitution a provision making Texas Mexicans ineligible for citizenship and confiscating all their property. The wisdom of his course was demonstrated when the United States army marched into the new territory taken under the folds of the Stars and Stripes. Kinney's example and influence with the dark-skinned racial minority kept them from organizing guerilla detachments to harass the American soldiers as they moved from the Nueces to the Rio Grande.

And but for the shrewd strategy of Kinney, not only the entire stretch between the two rivers would have been lost to the United States, but all the territory finally acquired in the Mexican War as well. Doubt existed in Washington as to whether the southern boundary of Texas should be fixed at the Nueces or the Rio Grande. Had the United States agreed upon the Nueces, the boundary when Texas had been a Mexican province, a compromise short of war would have probably been patched up. But, also, this country might have never gained possession of New Mexico, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and big slices of what are today Colorado and Wyoming.

Some of Kinney's tactics were not pretty, judged by today's standards.

But that was the age of blatant imperialism, when ends were deemed to justify any means. For months before annexation, Kinney, acting on his own, had been sending dispatches to Washington via the American minister to Texas urging that the Rio Grande be proclaimed the boundary. He knew that his own contacts in the American capital would use their maximum influence on President Polk. For the man who would lead the army into the new state was his old comrade-at-arms, Zachary Taylor. Another long-time friend, Jefferson Davis, was a leading member of Congress from Mississippi, and one of Polk's mainstays.

No Texan ever gambled for higher stakes than that Texan now forgotten. No Texan ever felt a greater flush of victory when word came that the United States would recognize no other boundary than the Rio Grande, and that his town of Corpus Christi had been selected as the basis of operations against Mexico.

Corpus Christi mushroomed into a typical Western boom town when the soldiers came with Kinney, its colorful founder, riding the crest of the boom. He established one of Texas's first newspapers, *La Estrella Americana* (The American Star), printed in both English and Spanish. The paper also served to advertise the town lots that Kinney offered for sale, with the result that many a soldier bought Corpus Christi property and returned to make his home on it, following the war.

Kinney's operatives brought to General Taylor regular reports on Mexican troop movements in the area. It was Kinney who loaned Taylor's command cannon from his personal arsenal until the American supply system could catch up with American soldiers.

When his countrymen marched toward and across the Rio Grande, the "Colonel" went with them as a high-ranking quartermaster. He fought gallantly in the crucial battle of Monterey, but his services were pre-eminently valuable as an intelligence officer. Through his fluent knowledge of Spanish, he was able to organize an extensive network of espionage which served the American forces well in the two years of bitter fighting.

He was one of the richest men in Texas when the war ended, but Corpus Christi had suffered the fate of most boom towns and was now but "an empty shell." Kinney remedied that with his money, earned as a food contractor during the conflict. At long last, he had the capital to realize his dream of improving the bay. He bought expensive machinery for dredging and widening. He followed this up by constructing tanks, wharves, and warehouses. Galveston was Texas's first modern port. Corpus Christi, through the genius of Henry Kinney, was its second.

But he needed more settlers to attract more ships. In one of the most ambitious colonization projects ever attempted by an American, he hired immigration agents throughout Europe. He inserted advertisements in newspapers over half the continent, calling attention to Texas and Corpus Christi. As a member of the state legislature, he sponsored bills to make easier the lot of the immigrant in a new country.

Boatloads of colonists began arriving—hard-working farmers from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany, charmed alike by the ever-warm climate of the Gulf and by helpful, hos-

pitable Colonel Kinney. They chopped down the brush to turn the Nueces Valley into one of the great cotton-growing sections of the United States. They replaced the roaring *cantinas* with churches, and homicidal little hamlets with stable, wealthy communities.

Henry Kinney, yet in his youth, had accomplished more than many an older man of his day. He was rich and well-married, to a woman who might not have Julia Webster's frigid glamor but who did possess the warm courage to put up with frontier living. Indeed, Kinney's early experience should have warned him to beware of Websters. It was his second bout with that illustrious family which led to his crushing downfall.

Kinney's heartbreak over Julia had never altered his close friendship with Fletcher Webster, now an official of the port of Boston. It was Fletcher who probably first involved him in the ill-fated fiasco which had, as its object, the conquest of Nicaragua, with Kinney slated to be ruler of that ill-fated little country. Even today the full details of that high-powered international intrigue are not known. But it involved in its cabal no less a person than President Franklin Pierce, ex-vice president George M. Dallas, who became Kinney's attorney, and others occupying high places in Washington.

Through a deal involving an Indian chief of somewhat dubious authority and some expropriated British claimants, Kinney organized a syndicate which secured title to three million acres on Nicaragua's appropriately named Mosquito Coast. The transaction was further clouded by the rival claims of Great Britain and Nicaragua to the Coast. Which should have been trouble enough for any man. But, in addition, a rival adventurer—William Walker, from Tennessee—was casting hungry eyes on the whole Nicaraguan republic.

Walker was laying his plans carefully and, meanwhile, shunning publicity. Kinney, for once—and fatally—was indiscreet. He mortgaged and sold his Texas property recklessly to finance his new venture into empire. He went North and gave out interviews to many papers, announcing his colonization plans.

Confronted by a common danger, the British and Nicaraguans made common cause. Attorneys for the British interests persuaded the Nicaraguan minister in Washington to denounce Kinney's proposed venture as a filibuster, something that he steadfastly denied. The hue and cry resulted in a federal grand jury indicting Kinney, but Lawyer Dallas employed clever legal technicalities to see that he was never tried.

Alarmed by the turn of events, President Pierce cleared his own skirts by ordering a blockade of the steamer which Kinney had chartered to take his armed "colonists." Instead of five hundred conquest-bent buckies, Kinney sailed with only thirteen—and then in the dead of night, dodging harbor patrol boats.

He was hoping to land in Nicaragua before Walker and plant his sceptre first. But on the way, Kinney and his men were shipwrecked on a barren island. Eventually, a British steamer picked them up and dumped them, sick and bankrupt, in the abandoned port of Greytown.

The refugees set up a makeshift regime with Kinney as "governor." But nobody else on the Coast acknowl-

edged his authority and, in a year's time, even his handful of men were deserting to Walker, who accepted them but would have nothing of their commander, fearing him as had Sam Houston.

Twice, Kinney was to return and try to regain possession of Greytown. Twice, he was to be driven back in ignominious defeat, by gringo-hating peasants who would shortly wreak a worse fate on the more successful invader, Señor Walker.

For that picaroon breed of the filibusterers never realized what wiser men have learned since. The brown *Indios* below the Rio Grande either absorb or destroy their conquerors. So it has been in all the centuries since Cortez.

Kinney came back to Corpus Christi in 1859, penniless and prematurely gray. In a typically Texas gesture, his fellow citizens elected him again to the legislature. But he seemed never to recover from the brooding daze that had possessed him since the failure of the Nicaraguan coup.

No longer was he master of the growing city. Tropical malaria racked his sallow body. He had no part in the developments that were transforming the bay into an ever more prosperous port. But when he saw the big ships put in, he must have heard the little waves lapping.

It went against his grain to be the town's favored pauper when he had been its princely lord. At the beginning of the Civil War, Kinney resigned his legislative seat and headed toward the Rio Grande.

Forty-seven is a flickering age to begin new adventures, but a young age to die. Perhaps that last journey was Henry Kinney's voluntary exodus—into oblivion. Just possibly, his eyes were fixed south on some new star of empire when he reined up his horse in the old plaza at Matamoras.

He got no farther than that town, just a stone's throw or a rifle shot from Texas, depending on the times. Two local political factions were gunning for each other, and Kinney volunteered to fight with one of them. He was climbing through a breach in a wall, when a bullet smashed his skull.

A ragged peon looked down at his kill, then carelessly wiped the smoke from his rifle. For the brown folk have always the last word—and the last shot.

SQUATTER'S CLAIM

A NEWCOMER to the hills and gullies of California in the Gold Rush was anxiously looking for an unclaimed piece of ground around Nevada City from which to make his fortune. In his search, he came across a bewhiskered party rocking a box all by his lonesome, and since that particular ravine seemed untenanted, the seeker broached the burning question.

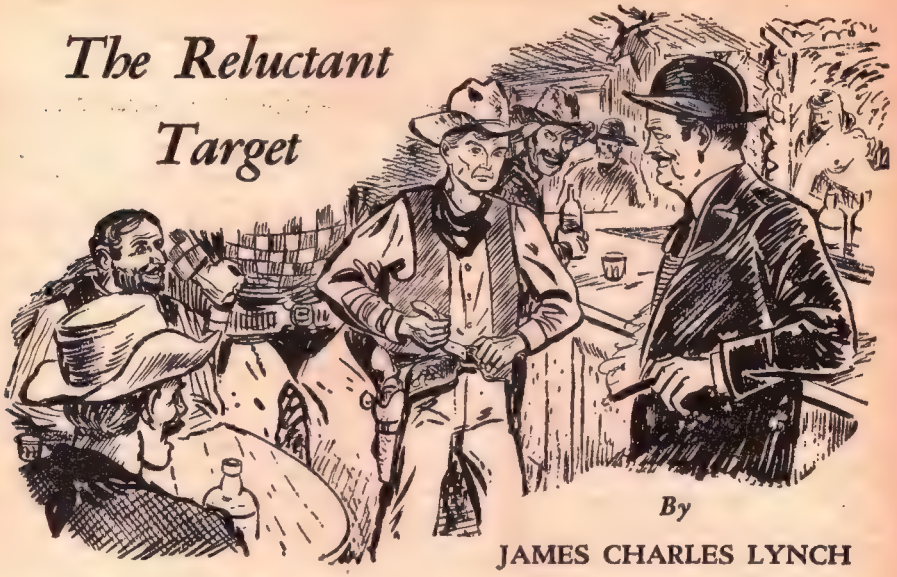
"How much land do you claim here, Sir?" he asked.

The miner looked him over carefully, shifted his quid to the other side of his jaw, and jerked his head toward a handy stump.

"See that rifle yonder?" he asked. The seeker nodded. "Well," said the miner, "I claims as far up and as far down this ravine as she can carry. The rest is yours."

—DALE ROBERTSON

The Reluctant Target



By JAMES CHARLES LYNCH

Willie MacCameron tells the truth because he has to—and finds that truthtelling brings consequences both pleasant and unpleasant.

AT ONE o'clock in the afternoon, George Fallon's saloon was already crowded with Red Rock's first citizens, gathered there to fortify themselves for the ordeal ahead. Last night an unknown assailant—who everyone knew was Pete Mundy—had ambushed Duffy Malone, the town marshal, and shot him down. The late Mr. Malone was to be buried within the hour.

The heavy trade had put Willie MacCameron, the roustabout, behind in his work. He hurried in now with a half-dozen brightly polished spittoons. Five of them he spun into place along the front of the bar. The sixth he deliberately dropped on the toe of Eli Sloan, the mayor. Sloan, with great annoyance, turned from contemplating his sad image in the backbar mirror.

"Too bad about Malone, huh, Mr. Mayor?" said Willie.

"Why yes," said Sloan, forced to change his attitude because Willie's question was a matter of public interest. "Yes it is, Willie. But don't think we won't do something about it. We're going to make Red Rock a safe place for decent people. You mark my words." He glared at the other patrons and then turned back toward the mirror to glare at himself.

Willie wiped the tips of his fingers on his limp vest and strolled outside onto the saloon porch. The pretenses of men like Sloan both amused him and gave him a pain in the neck. They were always posing, trying to be some-

thing they were not and were never intended to be. Men's lives, Willie held, were planned for them in advance, and all their headaches came from trying to buck this scheme of things.

He was glad he was smart enough to see this truth and profit thereby. It was easy when you knew how. All a man had to do was say what other men wanted to hear, do what other folks wanted you to do—if you couldn't get out of it without causing trouble—and not want anything you couldn't have without getting yourself killed over it.

Across the street the door of Lucy's Lunchroom swung open and a slim, blond woman, wielding a broom, appeared in the opening. Lucy Hunt was, beyond doubt, the prettiest woman in Red Rock, even including the girls at the far end of town, and she worked the hardest, which proved Willie's theory of life. If Lucy would just say *yes* once in a while she could have anything she wanted. Instead she always said *no* and the result was an all-day drudgery from which she made very little profit.

"Hello, Beautiful!" Willie called across the street. "How about the dance Saturday night?"

"No, thanks," said Lucy, pausing to straighten her back for a moment.

"Maybe you're going to the funeral?" he asked.

"Maybe," she said.

"We could walk together—maybe?"

"No, thanks."

Willie scowled at her and turned back inside, muttering to himself about Lucy's pride and feeling discontent, for a moment, with his own lot in life. And he suddenly decided that if Lucy was maybe going to the funeral, maybe he would go too. All he had to do was to trap Fallon into granting him that privilege. Ordinarily he would have to stay and watch the place.

He was behind the bar, busy washing and polishing glasses, when Fallon came out of the back room. Fallon was a big man, heavy of body and feature, dressed now in white shirt, black coat and tie, and black derby hat. At the moment he carried a bulging canvas sack in the palm of his right hand.

Keeping his chin on his chest, like a man deeply grieved, Fallon opened the cash drawer and dumped in the contents of the sack, a goodly quantity of gold and silver coins. Before he could push the money from sight, Willie bent over the drawer, licked his lips, and then glanced obliquely up at his boss.

"Mr. Fallon," he said, "much as I'd like to go to poor Duffy's funeral, I'll stay here and look after things, if everyone else wants to go." He ran a finger tentatively around the rim of the money drawer.

Fallon looked at Willie, and then at the money in the drawer, and sighed.

"No," he said, "I don't see any use of you hanging around here. There won't be any business, anyway, until we get back. You might as well come along. Duffy was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"The best friend a man ever had," declared Willie.

"Yeah," said Fallon, sadly. "Duffy Malone was a friend to us all. I suppose we might as well get it over with."

Mayor Sloan moved slowly down the bar and fell in beside Fallon when the saloon man came out from behind the counter and, together, they stepped heavily toward the door. Walking behind them, Willie scratched the stubble on his cheeks and wondered about the secret thing in George Fallon that

set him apart from all the others. Fallon could change the scheme of things as easily as he could change his mind. Destiny, to him, was no more than a hunk of wet clay to stomp into any shape he happened to admire at the moment.

Everyone falling into line behind him knew Fallon was as guilty of Malone's murder as if Fallon himself had pulled the trigger of the gun. Yesterday, when Pete Mundy had ridden in from the hills, he had gone directly into Fallon's back room and stayed there until five minutes before Malone was shot down. Yet every man in Red Rock studiously ignored that coincidence, and Fallon could talk glibly of *friend* Malone.

Fallon and Mayor Sloan walked on down to Worth's Store, where the black hearse and team had been ready for some time. There was a fringed surrey next in line and Fallon and Sloan climbed into that. Worth and his assistant came out, mounted to the high seat of the hearse, and put the black team in motion. Men began to step from the walks to form a line of march behind the rigs.

When Lucy Hunt found a place in the procession, Willie moved in close behind her, uneasy and angry because of the hungers she set rioting in him, even though he knew she was never to be for him. Lucy had her sights set higher than a roustabout, higher than anything yet seen in town.

They eventually came to the open grave on The Hill, and Sloan and Fallon climbed from the surrey to move solemnly up and take their places in front of the others. Willie hunched his way through until he stood beside his boss.

Worth, a somber, fussy little man, and his assistant got things ready. With the help of a half-dozen others, they lowered the box into the grave and stepped back, glancing around. It was Fallon who finally said, with some impatience:

"Well, Clyde, where's the preacher?"

Worth stammered, "I thought you knew, George. Percival's sick. If you want something said—"

Fallon looked around and suddenly smiled upon Willie MacCameron.

"You," he said. "Say a few words, Willie."

The habit of obedience was strong in Willie and he found himself standing at the head of the grave, grinning back at his boss.

"What," he asked, "should I say?"

"How should I know?" retorted Fallon.

A great uneasiness came over Willie and he looked around for some kind of help, and found nothing but Fallon's humor reflected everywhere, until he glanced at Lucy Hunt.

"Will," she said, "at a time like this, all you can say is the truth. Remember, you're not talking to us, you're talking to God."

"Yes," muttered Willie, knowing he had been trapped. He didn't want to talk to God. He didn't want to talk with anyone. He wanted and wished to be some other place. Yet this situation had come up, so it was probably meant to be. The thing to do now was examine the angles carefully and get it over with as little damage and danger as possible. Because when a man talked to God, he could not lie.

"God," Willie finally said, with some relief, "Mr. Fallon, Mr. Mayor, ladies and gentlemen. All of you gathered here have always thought poor Duffy Malone was some kind of crook. You

are right. He was."

Willie paused and sucked in a long breath. So far, so good. He had told the truth and everyone here knew it. If he could only stop now, everything would be all right. Only Mayor Sloan had been offended. But Willie realized, with growing agony, that having gone this far he could not stop. What if God, so busy with a multitude of details, depended on the record of the last words said over a man to determine his Heaven or Hell destination?

Willie looked up at the sky and said, "Oh Lord!" and waited awhile for some kind of divine guidance. It failed to come, but he could not find the courage to let Duffy Malone down completely. After all, Duffy had done him a few favors, like loaning him a half dollar once, and not saying anything to Fallon the time he caught Willie sneaking out a bottle of whisky to sell to an Indian.

"Duffy Malone," Willie finally blurted out, "was just like the rest of us. He did what he was told by them that had the power to make him do it. But the time came when he was told to do something that was even too much for him. He wouldn't string along and he said, 'I'll see you in hell, first.' So they got rid of him."

Willie faltered a little, keeping his eyes on the sky so he wouldn't have to look at George Fallon. "Now this is the question. If Duffy Malone was willing to go to hell in order to stop a dirty deal, doesn't he rate something better than that for taking a stand? Amen!"

Willie looked quickly down at the grave then and wished somebody would laugh, but no one did. Later, he heard the springs of the surrey squeak and knew the rig was moving away.

He still had not moved when Clyde Worth said, "Stand back, will you, Willie? We haven't got all day."

Everyone had vanished except Worth and his man, so Willie started slowly down the hill and was surprised to find Lucy Hunt waiting beside the road.

"How was I, Lucy?" he asked. "Funny?"

"No," she said. "At least, I didn't think so, Will."

"I hope Fallon thinks so," said Willie. "That was a dirty trick, him making me talk."

"He didn't make you talk," Lucy pointed out. "He just asked you to say something and you broke your neck trying to please him."

"Yeah," said Willie. "Then I broke my pick trying to please Duffy. I might as well of accused George of helping to murder him."

"That's no secret, Will. Everyone knows that."

"Sure," said Willie, gloomily, "but I'm the only one who's said it out loud. George won't like that. He'll do something about it."

He hoped Lucy would make some suggestion, but she said nothing more until they came to the middle of the street between her place and Fallon's. Then she only said, "Good luck, Will," and turned away.

Willie watched her out of sight and then walked slowly into Fallon's. The place was jammed and everyone seemed waiting for him, especially George Fallon. Men yelled his name and laughed at him. They grabbed him and overcame his reluctance and pushed him along to the end of the bar where Fallon stood with Mayor Sloan.

"Willie," said Fallon, in high good humor, "you're a card! That was the

funniest thing I ever heard. What we ought to do for you is build you a church and make a preaching man out of you. Folks would come from far and wide to hear you try and out-lie the devil. Wouldn't they, boys?"

"Amen!" they shouted.

Willie searched Fallon's eyes, trying to find the catch in this.

"But we can't afford to waste you in church," Fallon continued. "The mayor's put first claim on you. He's going to make you the marshal. You're going to take up where your friend Duffy Malone left off."

"Aw, now wait a minute!" protested Willie, trying to back away.

"How about it, boys?" bellowed Mayor Sloan.

"We want Willie!"

"There's your answer, Willie." The mayor beamed. "A man can't turn down the public, either. Not when he's called. Here."

Willie found himself holding Duffy Malone's gun and belt. Under their urging he tried it on, making the belt tight enough by drawing it to the last notch. The laughter of the crowd grew louder now and he began to get a little sore about it until he remembered and began to laugh, himself.

Being marshal wouldn't be so bad—it paid three times what a roustabout could make. The fact that he had not sought out the job relieved some of the tensions, too. It was only when a man reached out for something that didn't belong to him, that it caused him trouble. When things fell on your head, it meant they were supposed to be. For a moment he enjoyed the illusion of being great and especially endowed.

"Boys," he said expansively, "if you want me for your marshal, you'll have to stand behind me when the chips are down."

"Sure thing, Willie," they promised. "We'll be right behind you all the way."

Their promises made him feel good, even though he knew they were a bunch of liars. If he ever laid down any chips they wouldn't even hang around to watch the game.

"All right," he said. "Now where's my star?"

"Why, it's buried six feet under," said Mayor Sloan, "because that fool Worth forgot to take it off Malone's coat. And we don't have a spare, either. All I can do now, Willie, is charge you with keeping the peace and enforcing the laws. You are so charged."

Fallon snorted, lifted a twenty-dollar gold piece out of his vest pocket, said, "Catch, Willie," and flipped it into the air.

Willie was of half a mind to let it fall into the sawdust on the floor and ignore it, but he changed his mind at the last second and snatched the spinning coin from space.

"Now," Fallon went on, "take that down to Atherton and tell him to make you a star."

Willie knew that was Fallon's first order and he accepted it.

"Sure, Boss," he said, and pocketed the coin.

The sun had disappeared, but it was not yet dark when Willie, his new star in the palm of his hand, left Atherton's and moved down to Lucy's place. It was too early for the supper crowd and the place was empty of customers, as Willie had hoped it would be. Settling himself on a stool, he waited until Lucy faced him, then opened his palm and let her see the star.

Lucy glanced at it with some curiosity.

"What's that?" she asked.

"My badge!" said Willie. "Solid gold. I'm marshal now."

Heat flickered in Lucy's big eyes. "So that's what Fallon did to you. He gave you a star. But does that make you a marshal, Will?"

"Why not?"

"Malone wore a star," said Lucy. "And the man before him. Neither of them enforced the laws. They were not real peace officers, to my way of thinking."

"Is that so?" flared Willie. "Seems to me that Duffy Malone enforced the law. He—"

"He picked up an occasional drunk and tossed him in jail," said Lucy, "—after he had emptied their pockets. But did he ever close Fallon's saloon at midnight, which is the law? Did he ever make the cattlemen from the hills check their guns so they couldn't shoot up the town when they got too much to drink? Taking guns away from men is a law here, too."

"First I ever heard of them," argued Willie. "And I don't think Malone knew about them, either."

"He knew," stated Lucy. "And now you know, too."

Willie scowled at the star in his palm and finally pinned it on his shirt. This hadn't turned out as he had wanted it to; even the star didn't hang right. Instead of looking like a badge and symbol of authority, it sagged like an ornament, sloppily made.

"It's pretty heavy," he muttered. "Heavier than the tin badge Malone wore."

"Well, don't worry about it," urged Lucy. "Fallon will help you carry the load around, anyway. Can I get you something to eat, Marshal?"

Anger reddened Willie's face. "No you can't," he said. "And you can't talk to me that way, either. What do you know about it—or me?"

Lucy placed her palms on the counter and stared thoughtfully at the tips of her fingers. "Not much, I guess," she admitted. "All we ever know about another person is from what he does."

"That's right," said Willie, slapping the counter. "And you can't judge a man by what he does until he does it."

"Or until he doesn't do it," Lucy pointed out. "And that's the hardest kind of judgment to make. A man who doesn't do anything always reminds me of an ugly woman. An ugly woman can be just as warm and loving in the dark as the most beautiful, and if it would only stay dark, a lot of us would be happier. But we can't live all of our lives in the dark, Will. The daylight always comes to give us away. And every time I see you in the daylight, you never look very big and you always have a dirty face."

Before Willie could reply to that, Lucy's first supper customers came in, so he took his anger out into the dark. For an hour after that he tramped the town's side streets, analyzing what Lucy had said and trying to tear it to pieces, but her simple philosophy was too durable to destroy. After a while, he went into Fallon's by the back way, gathered up his meager belongings, and carried them down to the tiny marshal's office next to Clyde Worth's store.

Beside the small front office containing a battered desk and chair, there was a small back cubby furnished with a cot, dresser, wash bowl, and bucket. The odors of Malone's vices still clung heavily here. Willie left the back door

open while he stowed his stuff in the dresser drawers.

Later, he sat in the dark in the front room and listened to Red Rock's night sounds and tried to think himself onto safe ground. At the moment, he didn't want to show himself for he had observed that men had a way of blundering into trouble when they were aroused and on edge.

This middle-of-the-week night was comparatively quiet. A few riders loped in from the hills, but they were mostly ranch owners, settled and with the privilege of sleeping late on a work morning. There would be no real trouble until the crews roared in for their Saturday-night bust. There would be no trouble then if a man watched himself and kept out of the way.

Each time he struck a match to light a cigarette, he waved the flame toward the clock on the wall. It was near twelve when he heard the familiar tread of George Fallon on the walk outside. But Fallon passed without even looking in—Fallon rarely took an interest in sure things.

After a while, Willie left the office and wandered up toward Fallon's for a drink. All of his thinking had come to nothing. He still felt anger when he thought about Lucy Hunt and it made him no less calm to see the lamps in her place still burning at this hour. Just as he turned into Fallon's she appeared in her doorway and he knew she would recognize him when he walked under Fallon's porch lamp.

When he went in, Tom, the bartender, looked up and smiled. There were two poker games and a faro layout going full blast, all of them run by housemen. Mayor Sloan had a chair at a poker table and seemed to be having luck.

When Willie got to the bar, Tom said, "What will it be, Marshal?"

"It's after twelve," Willie said. "Close up now, Tom, and turn out the lights."

Tom looked blank, then he laughed and said, "Damned if you didn't have me going for a minute. You sounded real. What will you have, Willie?"

"You heard me," Willie said. "Close up. Turn out the lights. The law says you close at twelve. I'm supposed to enforce the law."

Tom tried to laugh and wound up yelling at an old man standing watching the play. "Jerry! Get on down and tell George to come back. Willie's ordering me to close up, the fool!"

The old man started for the door and Willie moved in that direction, making the crowd think he was on the run. But their chuckles died out when he wheeled at the door and planted his back against the wall.

Lifting his gun free, he said, "Don't pour another drink, Tom."

Mayor Sloan jumped up and bawled, "Now see here, Willie! I hired you, and by—"

"Shut up!" flared Willie. "You hired me because Fallon told you to. And you wouldn't dare fire me, unless Fallon told you to do that. You're mayor of this town. You know the law. Why don't you set a good example?"

Sloan stood there a moment, chewing on his cigar, and then he said, "Don't say I didn't warn you, MacCameron."

With that the mayor sat down again, but Frank Backus, a dark, moody gambler, refused to deal the cards. Instead, Backus pushed a hundred dollars in gold to the center of the table and whispered something. Three men covered the bet and then they settled back

to wait it out.

Fallon's momentum carried him four paces beyond the door before his instincts made him turn and bark, "What's this I hear, Willie?"

"You heard I told Tom to close the place," Willie said. "It's past midnight and you're supposed to close at that hour. That's the law. The marshal is supposed to enforce the law. I'm the marshal."

Fallon took the cigar from his mouth, looked at it thoughtfully, and nodded his head. "So you are. And I forgot about that law. It's been so long since anyone's ever bothered about it." Turning, he signaled Sloan and started for the back room, saying, "All right, boys. Go home. Close up, Tom."

Willie stood there long enough to see Backus smile and reach for the gold stacked in the center of his table. Then he walked out onto the porch and stood there, wondering what Backus knew that he didn't know.

The customers filed out. Some of them bid him good night and some just looked at him. The ranchers found their horses and rode slowly out toward the hills. The townsmen walked off by twos and threes to break up into splinters of shadow and disappear. The bartender came out, turned off the porch light, and vanished.

The town was dark now save for the lights pouring past Lucy Hunt, who still stood in her doorway. Willie crossed the street. He couldn't see her face, but her voice was soft and gentle.

"Can I fix you a cup of coffee, Will?" she asked.

"You can get in there and turn off those lights before I come in and turn them off for you," he said curtly. "You're no better than anyone else around here."

"That's right," she said, and turned inside.

Through the window, Will saw her move down the counter, turning out the lamps. Had she shown any anger, he would have been satisfied, but she only smiled as she went along.

Then it was dark in there and she was gone and Willie began to shake and perspire as reaction set in. He had acted like a fool. Tomorrow, the first thing in the morning, he would have to retract everything. He would have to get back into the pattern of things. He was not a marshal. He was a roustabout wearing a badge.

Willie didn't sleep much and he rose early, ate a breakfast at the Chinaman's, and walked straight back to his office. He did not want to talk to any man about last night, not until he had spoken with George Fallon, first, and George was not an early-rising man. Will had never heard him speak a pleasant word before noon, and he wanted Fallon to be in a pleasant mood when they sat down together.

Willie picked one o'clock as the time, and when that hour came he left the office and started down the walk. But each succeeding step grew harder to take and he came to a complete stop still fifty yards short of his goal. And he was still standing there, arguing with himself, when he became conscious of a horseman staring down at him.

Will looked up into Pete Mundy's eyes. Mundy slouched in his saddle, a thin, hunched man with a mass of greasy black hair showing under his hat. An enormous cud of tobacco bulged one cheek and brown juice trickled from the corners of his turned-down mouth. Sitting there, he exam-

ined Will minutely, taking him apart. Then, tilting back his head, Mundy laughed crazily and rode on.

Will watched him ride as far as Fallon's, turn in, dismount, and scuttle inside. Then he turned back toward the marshal's office and made it and sat down, waiting for fear to strike him and wreck his nerves, and to wonder how much longer he had to live.

This was all Lucy Hunt's fault—Willie agreed with himself on that. He had been going along all right until she had butted in with her advice and confused him so that he had stepped out of line without thinking too much about it. He hated her for that.

Late in the afternoon, while there was still light enough to see without a lamp, Will went into the back room, stropped his razor and shaved, and when he was through he studied the image in the mirror. The face of the man he saw there was lean, with tight-drawn skin and slight hollows in the cheeks. There was a rather finely chiseled, straight nose and flat, stubborn lips, not too full. Then the night crept into the room, the image faded and Will stood alone.

He took his time traveling from his office to George Fallon's saloon. When he pushed through the door he moved leisurely across the room, nodding to Frank Backus, the gambler. He walked down the length of the bar and, in that distance, he drew his gun. At the door of the back room he halted, raised his right foot, and kicked viciously. The panel flew inward.

Pete Mundy sat with his back against the far wall, facing the doorway. George Fallon sat on Mundy's right, his elbows on the table.

Will stayed where he was, visible to the whole crowd in the big outer room. "Mundy," he said, "I'm arresting you for the murder of Duffy Malone."

Mundy started to laugh and changed his mind. Frowning, he glanced at Fallon and what he saw there made him move, fast. His lifting hands first fooled Will, then upset the table, and he got in the first shot. His bullet drove Will back.

Will stopped his backward fall, anchored himself, and shot Mundy through the chest. That turned Mundy half around and, when he turned back, Will shot him again.

Fallon looked at Mundy, incredulously, then pulled a gun from under his coat. Will's third shot made Fallon's head tip gently down to rest upon the table, as if he were so tired he would never open his eyes again, and that was true.

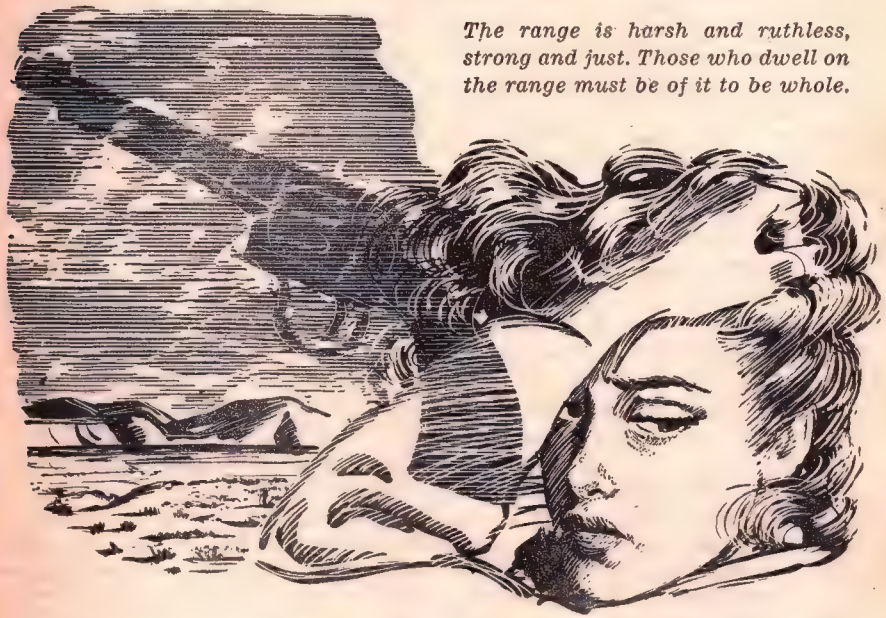
Not until Will turned his back on the small room did the fear he had waited for all afternoon hit him. And then all he was afraid of was that he still had not done enough to justify himself to Lucy Hunt.

"Gentlemen," he said, with great dignity, "will one of you see if you can find Doc Case for me. I need him." And that was the last he knew until he dreamed he lay in Lucy's bed and woke to find it wasn't just a dream.

"Please," Lucy whispered softly to someone. "Please spare him. We need him here. And I need him worst of all."

Will was pretty fuzzy and he couldn't make out who Lucy was talking to, but just before he rolled over and fell into a sound sleep, he made up his mind that he was going to be around, no matter what the scheme of things was. That was kind of a silly way to look at life, anyway. A man was what he made himself. No more. No less.

THIS LAND IS MINE



The range is harsh and ruthless, strong and just. Those who dwell on the range must be of it to be whole.

A Powerful Rangeland Novelette by Thomas Thompson

THE three fist-scarred men, dressed for riding, stood at the bar, having their last drink. It was warm in here but there was snow on the ground outside and the flanks of the saddled horses steamed. A fourth man came in, stamping the damp from his boots, blowing into his cupped hands. He said:

"Ready, boys?"

The men glanced at the tall rider who had been standing silently apart at the far end of the bar. He was a smiling man, a man with gray eyes and an easy, disjointed way about him. They looked at him and he grinned back and his smile bothered them all.

One said, "What the hell? It's a free country, ain't it?"

"Sure," the tall man said.

"I don't like what you're thinking."

"I haven't said a word," the tall man said. "You got scared and quit, the boss paid you off. What more do you want?"

"It's just that we ain't gettin' fighting wages, Mickey," one said, wanting to explain away his own conscience. "It's just that—"

"It will take more than wages," Mickey Tremaine said.

"You mean something by that, Tremaine?" a big man suggested. He had pushed himself away from the bar. His eye was cut and badly swollen. There

was a purple bruise on his left cheek and his battered lips were shapeless.

"Only that you're a bunch of rats," Tremaine said. "I aim to fumigate the bunkhouse soon's I get back to Broken Bit." He straightened and the loose-jointed impression was gone and his eyes were no longer smiling. He tugged his wide-brim hat a bit lower and pushed by the men and went outside.

He wasn't wearing a coat and he didn't seem to feel the cold. Behind him he heard a man say something, but it wasn't important now. He walked down the sidewalk a way and the girl stepped out of a store doorway and met him.

She said, "They quit, didn't they?"

He looked at her, acutely conscious of her oval face above the heavy muffler she had wrapped around her throat. He wanted to say the right thing. It was important. Instead, he said the obvious.

"You can always get another crew."

"Do you want to see one of them killed? Is that what you're after?"

"I want to see someone with guts enough to stand up to Ben Oliver."

Her blue eyes could be smoky with anger or they could be soft and understanding. They were angry now. Angry and hurt and bewildered— "Because you like a fight?"

"No," he said seriously. "Because Broken Bit is worth fighting for." When he said Broken Bit he meant this girl and Lon Murphy, her father. But he didn't know how to tell her that. He didn't feel it was a thing that needed telling.

She shrugged her shoulders and there was tired resignation in her voice. "Dad's with them now."

"I figured as much," he said.

She was according him his place in this, telling him he belonged with her father. She was grudgingly giving him her confidence. He felt that, and it was a reward he had wanted, but it was hard for him to say thanks or prolong a conversation with her. There was a stirring uneasiness in him when he was with her—a conflict between his desire to make her understand him and his pride that made explanations distasteful.

He went on down the sidewalk and he knew she was watching him. Hating him, perhaps. Most of all he didn't want her to hate him.

The troubled thoughts left a cloud in his gray eyes.

There was a small hotel in the middle of the block and he turned in there. The clerk spoke to him and gave him a room number.

Mickey said, "All right." He never seemed to be in much of a hurry when he was with men. "How's your wife feeling?"

"Just dandy," the clerk said. "You ought to come over and see the little shaver, Mickey. He's a humdinger. Looks just like me."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Mickey said. "Kids change."

"Go to hell, will you?" the clerk said, grinning.

"Probably," Mickey said.

He went down the hall and entered the room without knocking. The interior was blue with smoke. No one was talking at the moment. Lon Murphy of Broken Bit sat at a table with three other men. They looked up when Mickey came in.

Tremaine mentioned each one by first name: "Ben — Caleb — Grant—" He made no move to sit down.

They represented a lot of land, those three with Lon Murphy. Maybe a mil-

lion acres, all told. None of them knew for sure. The Mashed O was a syndicate, made up of Ben Oliver's original Mashed O along with Caleb Godfrey's Bench B and Grant Leland's Spur. The present boundaries were set by how far a syndicate cow could wander and by Lon Murphy's Broken Bit drift fences. Ben Oliver was hoping to change that.

Ben Oliver was the leader here, and everything about him said so. He was heavy of frame and voice, a man with a broken face strangely at odds with the thick-lensed glasses that constantly cut into the bridge of his bulbous nose. His deep-set eyes, pocketed in doughy folds of flesh, peered as if through a microscope. He paid little attention to Tremaine, but he was plainly annoyed at the intrusion.

"Well, Lon, we're waiting," he said.

"You settle about the two horses, Lon?" Mickey asked.

Color climbed in Ben Oliver's cheeks. "I don't think it's any of your business, Tremaine."

"I'm foreman. It's my business."

"We replaced the horses," Oliver said testily. "The entire thing was an unfortunate incident."

There was a bowl of pretzels on the table. Mickey leaned across and took a handful. "Keep your Syndicate gunhawks at home or there'll be an unfortunate burial."

Ben Oliver half rose from his chair. "Lon, are you doing the talking or is this hired hand?"

"Lay off, Mickey," Lon Murphy said quietly. "You're out of line."

Ben Oliver settled back in his chair. "Have you decided, Lon?"

"I have, Ben," Lon Murphy said.

He was a small man who had married late in life and lost his wife at the birth of his only daughter. There was a memory of his loss in his eyes and it made him look like a sad and mild man. He was neither. He stood up, and he was wiry and lean and saddle-hard.

"It's no go, Ben," he said. "Broken Bit is not for sale. It won't be, as long as I'm alive."

Ben Oliver was a shrewd business man. He knew when to control his temper, and he did it now. "We all got to stick together, Lon."

"Sure," Lon Murphy said. "But I don't have to sell out to you boys."

"I've told you a dozen times, Lon," Ben Oliver said patiently. "It's not selling out. We're partners—all of us."

"Then why don't Caleb and Grant say something?" Tremaine said.

The two men named squirmed uneasily and the temper was hot in Ben Oliver's eyes. "If you've got a reason for being at this meeting, Tremaine, state your business and then get out."

Mickey helped himself to the pretzels. "Your foreman has been pestering those nesters down on South Fork again. You keep him to hell away from there, Ben, or I will."

Ben Oliver's temper was visible under his skin and in back of his eyes. "What's the matter, Tremaine?" he said, his moist lips curling. "You think that nester girl is your private property? Why hell, every man within fifty miles—"

Mickey's motions were effortless. He moved across the room, his fingers gripped Ben Oliver's collar, and he lifted the big man to his feet. Lon Murphy's voice was like a whip: "Stop it!" Mickey's fingers relaxed slowly. He gave Oliver a small shove and the big rancher settled in his chair and ran his fingers around his collar.

"You better wait outside, Mickey," Lon said softly.

"I'd fire that son—" Ben Oliver said as soon as Tremaine had left the room. His voice sounded hot and dry. "So help me, I'd—"

"I'll handle Mickey, Ben," Lon Murphy said. "Just like I'll handle Broken Bit. Let me know if I can give you a neighborly hand sometime."

He shook hands with the three men and followed Mickey out into the hall. His face was stern now, his voice sharp. "What the hell's the idea picking a fight with Ben?"

"Because I don't like him," Mickey said.

"Well, watch it," Lon said. "Remember Broken Bit is mine, not yours."

"Sure, Lon."

"And the next time you start a fight with him," Lon Murphy said, nudging his foreman with his elbow, "make sure I'm not around to stop it."

The two men looked at each other and slow grins broke over their faces.

Margaret Murphy saw them coming across the street and she read her father's decision in those grins. She had made him promise to listen to Ben Oliver's proposition; she had begged him to accept. But she had lost. A woman's whim—a desire for comfort and security against a man's stubbornness. A woman always lost in that game.

She saw Mickey Tremaine watching her closely and she said, "You're happy about it, aren't you?"

"Sure," he said. "Aren't you?"

"No," she said quietly. "I haven't the same taste for trouble that you have."

Tremaine went down to the livery barn after the buckboard and when he brought it back he got down and helped the girl in, then climbed in himself and took the lines.

Over in front of the hotel Ben Oliver was talking to three men who were new in the town. They wore sheepskin-lined coats and striped trousers tucked into tall boots. One had a saddle carbine resting in the crook of his arm. The man with the rifle spat at his toe and stared intently at Lon Murphy, then he smiled thinly, nodded to Ben Oliver, and started walking toward the livery stable, taking his time. Caleb Godfrey and Grant Leland watched him go and there was sweat on their faces.

"No rough stuff, Ben," Caleb Godfrey said. His voice was uncertain. "You promised no more rough stuff."

"Quit worrying, Caleb," Ben Oliver said. He raised his hand and waved a friendly greeting to Lon Murphy and his daughter.

Margaret smiled and waved back. Mickey Tremaine let his thoughts dwell on Big Red Dawson and a nester girl on South Fork.

HE WAS a strange man, this Big Red Dawson, foreman for the Mashed O Syndicate. Right now, riding alone, he was in high good humor. It was partly by nature, partly because of the half-drained bottle in his saddlebag. He was a handsome man with pale red hair and pale gold-flecked eyes, a man as well muscled as a good quarter horse. He had the best job in the country and he meant to keep it. Whether the syndicate grew larger or not was of no immediate concern. Red Dawson thought only in terms of the present, and his religion was to follow Ben Oliver's orders as blindly as a well trained dog.

He had earned a bonus last week. A handsome one, and he liked that. It

had been a simple thing, and Dawson liked that, too, for his mind ran in simple channels. He had killed a Mashed O steer, skinned it, and hung the hide on the Broken Bit drift fence. Then, along with six burly Mashed O riders, he had set back and waited until the four members of the Broken Bit makeshift crew showed up. Under the circumstances there had been no trouble at all in picking a fight, and there had been no trouble at all in whipping the Broken Bit riders. Red Dawson had picked his own crew for the size of their fists.

A scowl crossed Dawson's usually placid face. He took off his glove, reached back, and unbuckled the saddlebag. He fished out the bottle and took a good, strong drink. If Tremaine had stayed out of it those four Broken Bit riders wouldn't even have been able to ride today. But what the hell, he thought. They had quit in the face of trouble, just as Ben Oliver had predicted. They weren't regular hands, just drifters hired at short wages. Big Red liked thinking about it, but there were more important thoughts on his mind and he was capable of thinking of only one thing at a time. Those Bohunk nesters who had squatted over there on South Fork had a mighty pretty daughter—

It excited Big Red to think of Marie Shimera. She was pretty young—maybe only sixteen or seventeen—but Red Dawson had always been of the opinion that if they were big enough they were old enough, and Marie Shimera would never be any more mature than she was now. He wiped his gloved hand across his lips and urged a little more speed out of his syndicate horse.

There was a scabbed-over scratch across Big Red's cheek, a souvenir of his last visit to the Shimeras. But that was all right. It put a little spice into the wooing.

He topped a small rise and looked down on the creek where it made a wide bend. There was a thin sliver of smoke trailing from the tin stove pipe that seemed to come directly out of the ground. *Damn foreigners,* he thought. *Live in a hole in the ground like a badger.* He took another drink and rode on down the slope.

Ben Oliver had given him hell about killing those two Broken Bit horses, but to hell with that. It had stopped the riders, hadn't it? He had done his job. He had his bonus in his pocket. Too bad he hadn't put a bullet in Tremaine while he was about it— The thought startled him and he immediately told himself he didn't mean it.

The snow had melted and the muddy yard in front of the Shimera dugout was as sloshy as a pig sty. Red Dawson looked at it and sniffed in disgust, and then he saw the girl and his heart started thudding a little harder in his chest.

She reminded him of a wild thing, her blond hair in braids, her shapeless dress short enough to expose her full, bare calves. She had large, luminous eyes that seemed eternally sleepy. Or flesh-hungry, maybe. He couldn't tell which, but he had his own ideas. Her lips were red, full and pouting. Moist lips. Her young body was maddening in its perfection.

The old folks came out of the cave and the old lady started wringing her hands. The father was thin and small, his eyes as smoldering as his daughter's. The knees of his trousers were bagged and stained with soil from much bending down to run his fingers through the rich earth he loved.

Neither of the old folks spoke a word of English; Marie could make herself understood.

Big Red dismounted and walked toward the dugout. The mother clung to her husband's arm.

"Don't be afraid, Marie," Big Red said. "I bring you a little present from town." He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a piece of cheap jewelry which he held toward her. "There you are," he said. "Squaw bait."

The girl snatched the trinket from his hand and threw it into the mud of the yard. The father and mother chattered excitedly in Bohemian, and then the mother ran forward, her bare feet sinking in the icy mire. Big Red fought a desire to shove the mother aside, knock the old man in the head, and be about his business. But hell, he didn't really want any rough stuff. He liked this girl. He wanted to make friends with the old folks—

He stepped back, opened the saddlebag, and took out the bottle, which he extended toward Mr. Shimera. The farmer's face was puzzled, then his thin features twisted as he tried to understand what he was to do. He looked at the girl and spoke to her and the girl shook her head.

"Friend," Big Red said. He talked to all foreigners as if they were Indians. "Me friend." How in hell did you go about talking to these knotheads?

A happier thought crossed Big Red's mind. He had some ammunition that would fit Shimera's rifle. A man could always use a present like that. He dug in the saddlebag and brought out the pasteboard box and he saw the hungry eagerness in Shimera's eyes. The mother protested, but Mr. Shimera quieted her.

"There, you see, Marie?" Big Red said. "Just tryin' to be friendly." He moved toward the girl.

The girl withdrew and started to cry. That made Red mad. He had never had any trouble getting a girl before. Bunkhouse talk was that this girl had been in a haystack with every man within fifty miles. Why, then, should she act so offish with him?

He reached out suddenly, gripped her wrists, and pulled her toward him. She fought, and it only excited him. He got his arm around her and held her close, squeezing her against him until her back was bowed and her head jerked back in pain. He lowered his head quickly and kissed her.

Her lips were young and warm and full of fire and it seared through Big Red like a demon. His hands were clumsy and fumbling. The world was black, and he had forgotten that any other human being was within a hundred miles.

He didn't hear the wailing of old Mrs. Shimera. He didn't feel the ineffective pummeling of Mr. Shimera's fists. And he didn't hear the buckboard drive into the yard. He knew nothing but blind passion until his arm was jerked nearly out of its socket and Mickey Tremaine's fist thudded against the butt of his jaw and spilled him into the mud.

Margaret Murphy, on the seat of the buckboard, saw that blow start. She had never seen such utter savagery in a man's fist. She hated violence, primarily because she could never understand it, and now as she saw Tremaine follow Big Red's falling body into the mud she could think only of two wild beasts fighting in a prehistoric swamp. Two beasts fighting for the right to claim a mate— The thought sickened her.

She saw Tremaine grip Big Red's hair, raise his face, and slam it into the mud. And then she saw his fists flailing, mutilating Big Red's handsome face. Blood was spreading, staining the mud. It made her sick to watch it and yet she couldn't avoid watching.

She was screaming, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" over and over, without realizing she was screaming. And then her father was down there in the mud and Mr. Shimera was there and Mr. Shimera was crying, horrible, broken sobs. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he tugged futilely at the two men there in the mud.

At last they tugged Tremaine free. He stood up, then broke away from them and kicked Big Red and then the girl Marie was in his arms, her head pressed against his chest. She was crying. Her arms were around his neck and he had his muddy arm around her waist. His voice was as soft as if he had been talking to a kitten.

"There now, don't you worry. He won't bother you no more."

Margaret Murphy heard that caressing voice and the sickness went out of her to be replaced by a terrible realization. The fear she had been fighting for months came to life and demanded recognition. She could no longer hide behind her sharpness and her hatred of the land. She could no longer deny that she was in love with Mickey Tremaine. She was in love with him, and the only reason she hated Broken Bit was because it claimed so much of the man—so much that she wanted for her own. She was weak and trembling with the admission.

She looked at the soggy land, dead now for the winter. She saw the miserable, blood-stained mud of the dooryard of a cave. She looked at these people, living in a hole in the ground like wild things, just to be near the land— And suddenly she hated them and everything connected with them and most of all she hated the land. It could make brutes of men, cattle of women. She had been right in the first place. They had to sell Broken Bit. Sell it to Ben Oliver and get out of this soul-warping country.

She heard Tremaine say, "You tell your daddy to kill him if he ever comes here again, you understand, Marie? You tell him to kill him. Your daddy won't go to jail. Nobody will do anything. You tell your daddy to keep his gun loaded."

Marie Shimera was saying, "Thank you, thank you." She pronounced it "Sank you. Sank you. You are our only friend, Mr. Mickey. You are our only friend."

"You quit worrying," Mickey said. "You'll do all right here. This ground is good, you got plenty water. Next spring everything will be beautiful, just like you told me your daddy said. Your daddy was right about the land, you hear?"

Margaret Murphy heard, and she felt weak and alone. There was understanding between this man and this girl. It was an understanding she hadn't been able to offer him.

Mr. Shimera and Lon Murphy were helping Big Red to his feet. They guided him toward his horse as if he were blind and saw to it that he got into the saddle and then Lon Murphy stood there, a gun in his hand.

"Damn you to hell, Dawson," Lon said. "If I see you around here again I'll kill you myself."

Lon Murphy was saying that. Her father. She had always thought of him as being kind and gentle and a little

sad, and now he was standing there with a gun in his hand, threatening to kill a man– That's what this country did to a man.

She started to cry, but the crying was all inside and her face was set and showed no expression. She stared straight ahead while Tremaine and her father climbed back into the buckboard, forgetting the small sack of groceries they had come here to deliver. Margaret remembered the groceries, but she looked at Marie Shimera and for a moment Margaret Murphy was completely a woman with all a woman's weaknesses. She hated Marie Shimera and she purposely forgot the groceries.

They drove off, following the bend of the creek, none of them speaking. Tremaine wiped the mud from his face with an embarrassed awkwardness. They turned into the rutted road that led through a draw, and Margaret Murphy cried inside.

And on a knoll above them in a soggy clump of cottonwood a thin, dark man with striped trousers tucked into high boots saw them coming, and he stood up. He had a saddle carbine in the crook of his arm. He levered in a shell now and there was a thin smile on his lips. Wyoming, the man called himself. Wyoming liked his work. He was paid well for it. He put the rifle to his shoulder, casually, and drew a fine bead on the back of Lon Murphy's head.

WITH a dull half awareness, Lon Murphy knew his daughter was unhappy, but he didn't know why. He sometimes thought Margaret didn't know why herself. Basically a mild man, he had hated having her see that fight at the Shimeras, and yet to him there had been no other out. Mickey Tremaine had behaved exactly as a man should have behaved. But there was pain and turmoil inside his daughter. He could feel it. He felt his own reaction to the fight–a trembling deep in his muscles, a weakness in the pit of his stomach.

He had to explain to her just how it was, just why he had to cling to Broken Bit. He turned and put his arm around her and he felt a tremendous, jarring blow. He felt a scalding that spread across his neck and shoulders and he felt a complete numbness and then he was falling. He was out of the seat before Mickey Tremaine heard the thin, high crack of the rifle.

Lon Murphy's falling body hit the off horse and the team jerked savagely into the harness. The wagon tilted as the front wheel passed over Lon's body and for those seconds Mickey Tremaine was busy and then he had the team under control and he was shoving Margaret off the seat with a back sweep of his arm. He jumped to the ground, snatching a rifle that was lying in the bed of the wagon.

Even while he was so occupied he knew that the shot had come from the cottonwoods on the rise. He saw Margaret struggling in the tangle of her skirts and he commanded her to keep down. A faint thudding of hoofbeats grew dimmer and dimmer.

His concern then was for Lon Murphy and he dropped the rifle in the mud and fell to his knees by the body of his boss. Murphy was bleeding profusely from a wound high in his left shoulder, close to the back of his neck. He was breathing, his mouth open, his lungs taking in great gasps of air with a strangling sound.

Then Margaret was there in the mud,

bending over her father. Her face was white, her eyes wide with horror, but there was a calmness about her. "Tell me what to do, Mickey."

Together they loaded Lon Murphy into the buckboard, moving him as easily as possible. His blood soaked them both, and he kept gasping for air, not moving, not trying to speak.

"Stay in back with him," Mickey said tightly. "Keep him from jolting around as much as you can. Do what you can to stop that blood."

"We'll go back to town?"

"That's right."

He drove madly, lashing the team until he feared they would fall in the traces. The first shock wore into a dull rage and that into a cold, killing drive. It couldn't have been Big Red. He knew that Red would go off somewhere to get drunk and nurse his wounds and coddle his grudge. Red was a fool, not a killer.

He spun the wagon into the main street of the town and stopped at the doctor's house. He remembered helping carry Lon's body; he remembered most of all Margaret's soft sobbing, remembered the pain of it. He went straight to the livery barn then and got a horse. There was nothing he could do here.

He didn't stop at the Shimeras', but rode directly to the rise where the cottonwoods dripped the slush of the melting snow. A fine rain had begun to fall and there were great patches of bare, brown earth under the trees.

He dismounted and stood there, staring at the ground. A man's boot heels had made small pockets that were filling with water. To the left were the markings where a horse had stood and waited patiently.

There was a single brass .30-.30 cartridge case on the ground. He picked it up and sniffed the fresh memory of powder, not knowing why he did it, and then he put the cartridge case in his shirt pocket and mounted his horse.

Carefully he started back-tracking the trail of the bushwhacker. It led him back to town and he lost it in the welter of tracks. He rode on to the doctor's house and dismounted and he knew death was there as soon as he walked in the door.

He saw Margaret sitting in a deep chair, staring straight ahead, not crying. He went to her and took one of her hands and she withdrew from him.

He said, "I'll find who did it, Margaret. I'll find him and—"

"And kill him?"

There was no need to answer such a question, he felt.

"You should be happy now, Mickey."

He didn't mind the accusation. He understood her grief, but for a moment he wanted her to understand his.

"We'll keep Broken Bit, Margaret," he said. "We'll do that for Lon."

"We?" She looked at him and her eyes that could be so alive were so dead now, and he couldn't read the expression on her face.

"I hate you, Mickey Tremaine," she said flatly. "I hate you and Broken Bit and everything about this country. You killed my father, Mickey. You and Broken Bit, and you're one and the same. I'm selling out—today, if Ben Oliver will draw up the papers."

"We'll talk about it later, Margaret. You rest now. Afterward I'll take you home and I'll get Marie Shimera to come stay with you—"

"Get out, Mickey."

He left her alone, going back outside into the slush of the street. He felt no anger nor hurt at her words, because

they were words he couldn't understand or accept. The news had spread already; he could feel it in the air. The town was quiet, holding its breath. He went to the hotel and the clerk said:

"It's a hell of a thing, Mickey."

"The baby looking like you, you mean?"

The clerk was a small man, a man who had never faced violence. The news of this killing had frightened him and he had thought of moving away from this place. He knew what it was all about and most of all he had promised himself he would keep out of it. He would say nothing—

He looked at Mickey Tremaine and the feeling passed. It was like having something familiar and permanent around when you needed it. His mouth was no longer dry.

He said, "Ben Oliver left with Grant Leland. Caleb Godfrey is still in there."

"Then I'll talk to him," Mickey said. He walked up the hall and the clerk squared his shoulders. He saw Mickey Tremaine turn the knob of the door.

Caleb Godfrey looked up and he wasn't afraid and it surprised him. Suddenly he realized there was no emotion in him at all. He was sixty-four years old, and he knew now for the first time that he was a failure, and perhaps that was what had driven the emotion from him. It was nearly restful to admit something this big.

He had sold his ranch to the syndicate, hoping to make a lot of money. He had made less than he had made before, and he had come now to realize that along with selling the ranch he had sold himself. There was a small gun in his pocket and during the last half-hour he had considered using it on himself, but he knew that was only a last surge of dramatics. He didn't have the nerve to do it.

Mickey Tremaine said, "You'll talk, Caleb?"

Caleb Godfrey nodded his head. It tired him terribly to do it. "Wyoming, he calls himself," Caleb said. "Thin, dark, always carries a thirty-thirty carbine—"

"I know the one."

"You gonna kill me, Mickey?"

"You've been dead for three years, Caleb," Mickey Tremaine said.

He closed the door softly and went back into the hall and this time he didn't speak to the clerk. He went out onto the sidewalk and stood there long enough to make a cigarette and smoke it down until the moist end of it refused to burn.

There were three horses tied across the street, horses with bedrolls behind their saddles. He watched them and waited and in a little while three men dressed for riding came out of the saloon. They wore striped trousers tucked into high boots—

Mickey spat out the cigarette and walked across the street. He saw the three men stop, and then the thin, dark one drew a carbine from his saddle scabbard. Mickey stopped walking.

"You're Wyoming?" he said.

The man with the rifle held it close to his side. "I'm called that."

Tremaine reached up with his left hand and fished the cartridge case from his shirt pocket. He tossed it and it fell at Wyoming's feet.

"You might want that for a souvenir. It's the one that killed Lon Murphy."

He saw the three men move apart, saw the thin smile on Wyoming's lips. Then the rifle was tilting and Mickey Tremaine held a gun in his hand and the hammer was back. He fired once

and he knew the rifle had never exploded. Wyoming had not fired it, and now he never would.

The two men with Wyoming had started for their guns and changed their minds. Both of them had thought the same thing—a dead man can't make much money. Things were wound up here; fifty dollars for a fist fight and no risk involved. Leave it that way.

One said, "It was personal between you and him, cowboy."

"That's right," Mickey said. "You fixing to leave town?"

"Thinking about it."

"Don't come back."

"Can't promise anything," the man said. "We'll take Wyoming's horse." He swung into his saddle and motioned to his partner with his head.

Mickey Tremaine stood there, the smoking gun in his hand, and he watched them ride out of town.

DOWN at the doctor's house Margaret Murphy heard that single shot. It broke the tension and she screamed. She ran out of the house, bareheaded, and she ran down the middle of the street, unmindful of the ankle-deep mud. She saw Mickey standing there and she saw the dead man sprawled half off the sidewalk and she stopped running.

A feeling of relief so strong it made her sick was in her and then she was angry, and it was violent anger, born of that violent relief. Mickey was safe; that was all that mattered, and yet she was angry— She started running toward him.

Mickey saw her coming and he tried to wave her back. She kept running toward him, determined now. He moved forward and they met in front of the real-estate office. She threw her arms around him and she couldn't control her sobbing.

"Take me away from here, Mickey. Let Ben have Broken Bit. Let him have everything. It isn't worth it—"

He pushed her arms down, gently, and he stood there looking at her, wanting her to know him more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

A voice behind him said, "I want to talk to you, Mickey." He turned and Big Red Dawson was standing there, his face monstrously swollen, his hands at his side.

Mickey Tremaine was not afraid of Red Dawson. He had drunk with the man, ridden with him on roundup, gambled with him. There was nothing about Big Red to admire, other than his ability with cows and his loyalty to the brand he represented, but there was nothing to fear, either.

"I'm listening, Red," Mickey said.

"I heard about Lon," Big Red said. One eye was closed, his lips were purple and protruding and they barely moved when he spoke. "I didn't have nothing to do with that, Mickey."

"If I thought you did I would have been to see you."

"Yeah, Mickey."

"Anything else?"

"Ben wanted me to kill you. He offered me five hundred dollars."

"Wyoming would have done it for fifty."

"Wyoming's dead."

"That's right, Red," Mickey said.

The girl stood there, hearing this, not believing what she heard. How could men talk of death with the same casualness with which they talked of a stray steer?

The sun broke through and down at the end of the street she saw the end-

less expanse of the prairie. The sun touched it and it was momentarily alive, splendid and permanent and unchanging and everything was dwarfed against its magnitude. It was like an answer to her question.

"I was wrong out there today, Mickey," Big Red was saying. "Me and booze don't get along. I made a mistake."

This big man looked like a small boy, Margaret thought. She looked at Mickey Tremaine and Mickey was smiling.

"Forget it, Red," Mickey said.

Big Red looked unreal with his puffed and broken face, his one visible eye that stared unblinkingly. And yet there was a semblance of expression on his face and in that one eye. It was the expression of one man completely understanding and respecting another man. Margaret Murphy saw it and she was envious.

Big Red said, "I'd stay on this side of the street if I was you, Mickey. It's warmer over here."

"Thanks, Red," Mickey said.

It was as plain to him as if Big Red had drawn a map. Over the saloon was an office which Ben Oliver used when he was in town. The office had a window that faced the street, but, due to the porches in front of the buildings, that window wouldn't afford any view of a man who walked this side of the street, close to the buildings. He gripped Margaret Murphy's shoulders with his hands.

"Broken Bit isn't a piece of land, Margaret," he said softly. "It's you and your dad and people like the Shimeras—Your dad felt that way."

He turned quickly and walked down the sidewalk, keeping close to the buildings. For a second she had looked at him and seen not a man but a cause.

Fear overtook her swiftly. Moments before, she had looked at Big Red Dawson with disgust and loathing. She had seen him as another animal product of the land. Now, suddenly, he was none of the things she had thought him to be, and yet all the rawness, the crudeness, and the violence were still there.

She thought of the land itself, cruel and raw, ruthless in its desires. And she thought of the spring when the warm breeze moved through the curly grass and the down sifted from the yellow-green cottonwoods— She gripped Red Dawson's arm.

"Stop him, Red. Isn't there something we can do to stop him?"

They saw Mickey Tremaine start climbing a covered stairway that led up the side of the saloon. A board creaked, and Mickey felt the perspiration on his forehead.

He mounted the steps slowly, testing each board, his eyes on the door that led off the small landing at the top. It was partially ajar and he thought of Ben Oliver, a man who thought of everything. Ben would be there with a rifle, peering out the front window, waiting for the shots that would tell him Big Red had found Mickey Tremaine. Ben could leave by that back door then, stay out of town an hour or so and ride back, and it would all be a surprise to him. He could put the blame for both killings on Big Red—help hang the man if it would make folks feel better.

The rest would be easy, and it would be only a beginning. After Broken Bit there were things to do at the State House. A reversal, perhaps, on the ruling that had opened up tracts to the south to grangers—

Mickey Tremaine reached the land-

ing and he pushed the door aside, noiselessly. "You ought to have sense enough to guard your back, Ben," he said.

Ben Oliver was crouched at the window, a rifle in his hands. The gun itself was a final piece of insurance, to be used only in case everything else went wrong. Self-defense, in case Big Red was too slow. Self-defense, because everyone knew Mickey Tremaine would be coming for him—

He heard the voice and he turned, his face doughy-white, his fingers momentarily lifeless. He saw Mickey standing there in the doorway. Standing there, smiling—

A million red-hot devils exploded in Ben Oliver's brain. He squeezed the trigger, saw the splinters fly from the lintel of the door. He levered furiously, and Mickey Tremaine fired, once.

Tremaine turned then and walked slowly back down the stairs. A silent, white-faced crowd was standing in the street. He saw Caleb Godfrey and Grant Leland. They were old men, both of them. Sick men. But they met his gaze levelly and he knew they would be whole again. He pushed through the crowd and took Margaret's arm and led her away.

There was nothing she could say to him, and she realized there never had been anything she could say. He made arrangements now and did things without consulting her and she remained silent, doing as he told her. He rented a buggy and drove it to the doctor's house, knowing she wouldn't want to ride in the buckboard. She looked out the window and saw him waiting, and slowly she wrapped her shawl around her head, knowing she was going back to Broken Bit.

When they had ridden a long way she said softly, "I want to bury Dad on Broken Bit, Mickey. It's what he would want."

"Is it what you want?"

She looked at the land, slumbering now, and it wasn't ugly. She saw it, perhaps, as Mickey Tremaine saw it. Or as Marie Shimera saw it— But she was seeing it too late, she knew; still, there was no great regret in the realization. She loved him, more than she could ever love any man, but she hadn't loved him enough, for to love this man was to love his way of life. Perhaps Marie Shimera could do that. She hoped so.

She said, "Yes, Mickey. It's what I want." She saw his knuckles whiten as his hands closed tighter on the lines.

"Caleb and Grant," he said. "They'll be good neighbors, soon as they find themselves. You'll have no trouble."

"I know." Was he trying to tell her he was leaving her? She didn't want him to be kind about it. He must know now how she felt about him. She wanted him to be honest with her as he was with himself; she didn't want him to protect her feelings. "Did you want to stop by the Shimeras?"

"I reckon," he said. "I want to tell them it's over."

"Of course." There was a hard lump in her throat and her eyes smarted. *Be brave*, she told herself. It was part of this life she was accepting for herself—

"Caleb and Grant will split off the old Mashed O and open it to grangers," he said. "It's what they wanted to do right along. Be a good chance for a man to pick himself up a farm."

She tried to think of him as a farmer, and she couldn't. She remembered Mr. Shimera with the soil stains on the knees of his overalls. She thought of

Author Lynch, after many years in the construction business, turned to the typewriter in 1934 and put in six long years as a ghost writer. By then, feeling that he was "written out," he gave away his typewriter and spent the war years as a production-control man and co-ordinating engineer in two defense plants. Before hostilities ended, however, he borrowed back his typewriter, wrote a story for fun—and sold it to the *Post*. Since then he's been selling regularly to the *Post* as well as other magazines. Five minutes after VJ Day he resigned his war job and has been writing full time ever since—for which a host of readers are duly thankful.

• Clark Gray, whose tall-tale yarns about the fabulous T. J. McDowell and his amazing exploits have afforded ZGWM readers many a chuckle, has left T. J. temporarily in the lurch to give us a story about a "Campaigning Cowpoke" whose ire is so aroused by official misconduct that he runs for a Texas sheriffship *on the Republican ticket*. Brother, that takes real, earnest, uncompromising *ire!*

• Harold Preece's article, "Conqueror Breed," deals with a little known but important figure in Western history, Henry M. Kinney. Hal, who has more noteworthy non-fiction coming up in future issues, holds it's one of his more substantial pieces, and we agree. It's a sober appraisal of a man who was authentically and colorfully a product of his time.

• Two more excellent pocket-edition Westerns have been added to the Dell Book list: *Vigilante*, by Richard Summers, and *The Thirsty Land*, by Norman A. Fox, whose popularity keeps growing steadily, and justifiably.

In next month's ZGWM: "The Silver Star," by Harry Sinclair Drago; "Dangerous Orders," by Les Savage, Jr.; "Notch Crazy," by S. Omar Barker; and others.

—THE EDITORS.

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the gossip she had heard about Marie Shimera—gossip that had made her disgusted and envious at one and the same time, twisting her thinking until she was ashamed of her own thoughts. Lies, all of it—

"Marie is a wonderful girl, Mickey," she said. She felt better immediately it was said, because she knew she meant it. It was as if the land itself had reached out now and in one final gesture claimed her completely and made her as honest as itself.

"She is," Mickey said. "She'll meet some young Bohunk farmer one of these days and they'll have a dozen kids and the country will be better for it."

She looked at him suddenly, the hope kindling again. His eyes were half closed and he was looking into distance, the way she had seen him look a thousand times. Her heart was pounding and she was afraid to trust her voice. She half closed her own eyes and looked ahead, trying to see the things he saw.

The prairie was there, flat and broad, with only a rolling mound here and there to soften the contour. She saw the river and knew in her mind the sound of it as it pushed softly through the grasses along its flat banks.

Steam rose from the flanks of the horses and curled from their rosy nostrils. It had grown cold and in the exposed places ice was forming on the grass. She felt a small chill and she moved closer to him, putting her hand under his arm, inviting him to embrace her.

He stared ahead at the land and held the team to the road and Margaret Murphy smiled, a contented smile, understanding him completely. She had accepted the land, and in accepting it she had won everything that went with it.

Answers to

"Powder River People"

Quiz on page 102

1. John Phillips.
2. William F. Cody. ("Buffalo Bill")
3. Nate Champion.
4. Tom Horn.
5. Thomas Twiss.
6. J. M. Chivington.
7. Butch Cassidy.
8. Father De Smet.
9. Jacques Lorimier. (Fort Laramie)
10. John Bozeman.

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3. Nate Champion.
4. Tom Horn.
5. Thomas Twiss.
6. J. M. Chivington.
7. Butch Cassidy.
8. Father De Smet.
9. Jacques Lorimier. (Fort Laramie)
10. John Bozeman.

FREE-FOR-ALL

L. P. HOLMES, the author of "The Fight for Bunchgrass Basin," this month's complete ZGWM novel, has never before appeared in the pages of this magazine. Nevertheless, he boasts a long and unusually popular tenure among the ranks of our leading Western-story writers. Author Holmes, who was born in a snowed-in cabin in the Rockies and grew up on a cattle ranch, has had a dozen novels published in book form, besides somewhere in the neighborhood of 500 shorter fiction pieces in magazines. That's a record not at all easy to match! Holmes stories have appeared in practically every magazine publishing Western stories in the past two decades.

Mr. Holmes lives quietly in the California hills, taking pleasure both in the grove of eucalyptus trees which surrounds his house and the rolling range country at his back door. He dislikes cities, which he sedulously avoids, and takes pride in giving his rangeland stories a true-to-life authenticity in background and technical detail. Annually, he takes some time off from his strenuous writing chores to go deer hunting in the mountains; likewise, he is fond of going after ducks in season.

In the words of one who knows him well, L. P. Holmes is "quite a guy"—to which comment ZGWM readers will no doubt add, after having enjoyed "The Fight for Bunchgrass Basin," *and quite an author, too!*

• Thomas Thompson, whose stories in ZGWM during the past year have brought many letters of appreciation from readers, scores once again with "This Land Is Mine," perhaps his most powerful yarn to date (what do you readers think?) And there are more Thompson tales coming, including an excitingly different novelette, "The Gunsmoke King Calls Quits," which will introduce "Loudmouth" Jones, as colorful and fully portrayed a character as you'll meet in many a year. It'll be something to watch for—don't miss it!

• Ernest Haycox's "The Inscrutable Man" is the first of this author's fine stories to be reprinted in ZGWM. All lovers of Western fiction sustained a heavy loss in the untimely death of Mr. Haycox last October. The well known writer was only fifty-one.

• "The Reluctant Target," by James Charles Lynch, is a tale with a moral: *Tell the truth—but be prepared to face the consequences of your truthtelling!*

Author Lynch, after many years in the construction business, turned to the typewriter in 1934 and put in six long years as a ghost writer. By then, feeling that he was "written out," he gave away his typewriter and spent the war years as a production-control man and co-ordinating engineer in two defense plants. Before hostilities ended, however, he borrowed back his typewriter, wrote a story for fun—and sold it to the *Post*. Since then he's been selling regularly to the *Post* as well as other magazines. Five minutes after VJ Day he resigned his war job and has been writing full time ever since—for which a host of readers are duly thankful.

• Clark Gray, whose tall-tale yarns about the fabulous T. J. McDowell and his amazing exploits have afforded ZGWM readers many a chuckle, has left T. J. temporarily in the lurch to give us a story about a "Campaigning Cowpoke" whose ire is so aroused by official misconduct that he runs for a Texas sheriffship *on the Republican ticket*. Brother, that takes real, earnest, uncompromising *ire!*

• Harold Preece's article, "Conqueror Breed," deals with a little known but important figure in Western history, Henry M. Kinney. Hal, who has more noteworthy non-fiction coming up in future issues, holds it's one of his more substantial pieces, and we agree. It's a sober appraisal of a man who was authentically and colorfully a product of his time.

• Two more excellent pocket-edition Westerns have been added to the Dell Book list: *Vigilante*, by Richard Summers, and *The Thirsty Land*, by Norman A. Fox, whose popularity keeps growing steadily, and justifiably.

In next month's ZGWM: "The Silver Star," by Harry Sinclair Drago; "Dangerous Orders," by Les Savage, Jr.; "Notch Crazy," by S. Omar Barker; and others.

—THE EDITORS.

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NIGHT HOSS

THE fire at the chuck wagon is cheering on a cold night, and the aroma of camp coffee mingles pleasingly with the pungent fragrance of sage on the crisp night air. Cowboys come in during the night for their reliefs, who then go out to the roundup bedgrounds to ride herd on the nervous critters. The nighthawk has his remuda out in the near-by hills and will bring it in at the first crack of dawn in the eastern sky. It may rain and sleet, it may snow and blow, but through it all the night hoss patiently stands tied to the wheel of the chuck wagon. The night hoss is a pony with lots of cow savvy—one that isn't apt to give his rider trouble when time counts, like in giving forth with fancy jumps and other capers. There's nothing but tired broncs in the rope corral that the incoming riders have turned out, and if a storm was to come up sudden-like, it would be the night hoss that could be relied on. The ever-ready saddle and blanket can be throwed on and the rider can be off in less time than it takes to tell. Yessir, that night hoss is a "must" on roundup!

DAN MULLER

In This Issue:

THE FIGHT FOR BUNCHGRASS BASIN, *by L. P. Holmes*

A gripping, fast-moving novel of range war, violence, and tense human drama. Savage conflict looms over the range as newcomers Pardee Dane and Grat Mallory move in, ruthlessly bent on taking over Bunchgrass. Strong-bodied, strong-spirited Cleve Fraser becomes a marked man when he spearheads the old-settler opposition. Vance Ogden, Cleve's pard from boyhood, meets tragedy, but Cleve gets help from others as he fights for himself and his neighbors and weighs the attractions of two vital, poles-apart women —Leslie Cormack, range girl, and Sherry Dane, sophisticated and seductive.

THIS LAND IS MINE, *by Thomas Thompson*

A compellingly powerful novelette. The range is harsh and ruthless, strong and just; and Margaret Murphy learns that those who dwell on the range must be of it to be whole.

THE INSCRUTABLE MAN, *by Ernest Haycox*

Bill Dolliver, the saloonkeeper with a secret, wields great power—over men's allegiances—over life and death—over a woman's happiness.

THE RELUCTANT TARGET, *by James Charles Lynch*

A cow-town roustabout tells the truth because he can't avoid it—and finds that truthtelling can bring all sorts of strange consequences, both pleasant and unpleasant!

—plus many other stories and features about the great American West.